

AN IMPERFECT MOTHER

J. D. BREESFORD

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by J. D. BERESFORD



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Chapter One

I

'MEANING to say, sir?' queried Hall II. in his brightest manner.

'Meaning to say, Hall, that when you send me up an essay composed almost entirely of quotations from standard authors, you might at least have the honesty to admit your authorities.'

The class roused itself from the wearied air proper to this last hour in English literature. Old Sercombe was not one of the regular masters at the King's School, and the general opinion held by the nine boys who came to him for instruction was that the subject had been tacked on to the ordinary school work in order to give him a job. They had no respect for his particular form of scholarship, and Hall II. had expressed the popular feeling when he had said that 'any fool could teach English.' Moreover, the class was held at the tail of the week, and both master and boys accepted the fact that the second hour on Friday afternoon was just a time to be 'got through'—particularly in the hot weather.

The prospect of a sparring match between old Sercombe and young Hall, presented itself as quite a desirable means of 'getting through' the present lesson. Young Hall was rather good at a rag of this kind. His father was editor of the *Medborough News*, and it was therefore a fair inference that the son ought to 'know something about writing.' The class stiffened to a new alertness.

1

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'Well, sir,' Hall explained, 'I did ask my father about it, and he said it spoilt your style and gave the comp. unnecessary trouble, to smother your stuff with quote-marks.'

Old Sercombe winced slightly at the abbreviated technicalities, but made no comment on Hall's facile use of them.

'Very interesting,' he remarked dryly. 'And did your father give you any other advice, Hall?'

'Told me to be bright, sir.'

'You are, I presume, proposing to take up journalism as a profession?'

'Yes, sir.'

Old Sercombe glanced down at the essay before him as if he wished to reconsider it in the new light afforded by young Hall's statement.

'As journalism it might pass,' he remarked in the undertone he so often adopted; speaking, it seemed, more to himself than to his class. 'But then you understand, Hall, you come here not to study journalism but the right use of English.'

'Meaning to say, sir,' young Hall returned cheerfully, 'that journalists don't write good English?'

Old Sercombe sighed and glanced round at the now attentive faces of the boys who composed this 'special subject' class. He felt old and helpless and altogether out of his proper atmosphere. How could he possibly explain to the uncomprehending youth of the twentieth century all the nice distinctions, of which he himself was so sensitively aware, between journalism and literature? The differences as he saw them at that moment were largely due to a wonderful tradition. A finely trained sense of values was essential before one could justly appreciate the beauties of phrase or rhythm or ordered expression. This journalist's son, with his handsome, impudent face, who used such abbreviations as 'comp.' or

'quote-marks,' would be incapable of recognising the differences if they were displayed for him. He belonged to a new world in which it was the mission of writers to be 'bright,' and the values of literature, as such, were of no account. What Hall and his contemporaries wanted was a kind of brisk and pungent shorthand.

Seeing no way of explanation, old Sercombe attempted an evasion. 'I have been holding this class twice a week now for two months,' he said; 'is there any boy here who can frame a definition of the differences between journalism as we find it in such papers as, for instance, the *Daily Mail*, and classical English literature?'

For a few seconds there was a blank silence. This was a rather unfair return to teaching. To demand thought from them at half-past three on a hot Friday afternoon, seemed to the majority of the class as little short of criminal.

It was Hall II. who finally replied.

'Journalism's much easier to understand, sir,' he said with a touch of impertinence. 'When you're writing for a paper you have to say what you mean straight out without any'—he paused before he added with an emphasis that was designed to anticipate any risk of his joke missing fire, 'without any *circumlocutions*, sir.'

One or two of the class sniggered audibly.

Old Sercombe hesitated. Secretly he appreciated the boy's wit; but amateur as he was in the business of keeping order, he was afraid to approve a pun that had labelled himself as a tedious pedant. The dilemma drove him to the usual resource of the inexperienced teacher. He attempted to assert his superiority by the use of irony.

'No doubt journalism would appeal to you, Hall,' he said. 'The simple and the bright are just within the limits of your mental capacity. But I must point out that, while you've defined journalism quite capably,

your suggestion that fine literature is a matter of circumlocution is hopelessly beside the mark.'

Young Hall's expression was one of wicked innocence. He was seventeen, one of the 'cracks' of the first eleven, and he had no fear that the master's irony would be turned against him by the rest of the class. If he had been less sure of himself, he might have dreaded the playground repercussions of 'simple and bright.'

'What's your own definition of "fine literature" then, sir?' he asked impudently.

Old Sercombe was intimidated. He did not understand boys. He ought never to have accepted the head master's invitation to take this class. He had thought that they would respect his years and proved scholarship; that his relations with them would be those of an honoured parent, gently condescending to his children's admissions of ignorance. But this self-assertive, self-confident youth challenged him; and in these surroundings, with that audience, would inevitably defeat him. He could give no definition of fine literature that would strike any response from these callous uncultivated minds. In imagination he heard his explanations repeated along the corridors as another instance of old Sercombe's 'locutions.' His most scholarly endeavour would sound prosy and pedantic to these young intelligences solely concerned with their vivid encounter with reality. They were all of a different class and period from his own, and he had no means of communicating with them.

With a sigh of despair he glanced desperately round the form—and unexpectedly found salvation.

Among the nine, there was one boy who was not sniggeringly expectant of his defeat; a boy who was regarding him with a look that seemed to express a kindly sympathy with his distress. It was young Kirkwood; the son of the bookseller in Long Causeway.

Sercombe remembered having seen him in his father's shop; but he had never spoken to him there, nor had the boy shown any marked intelligence or aptitude in the course of these lessons in literature.

'Well, Kirkwood,' he said, 'can you help us?' He felt curiously relieved, as if he had found ease after pain.

'I don't know that I can, sir,' Kirkwood replied, after an obvious hesitation. 'I mean, sir, I can't think of any definition. I suppose literature, the kind we're talking about, either appeals to you or it doesn't.' He paused before he added, 'And if it doesn't happen to, I suppose you'll never be able to understand it.'

No reproof had been intended, but Henry Sercombe felt that he had been reproved and had deserved his lesson. What right had he to teach? Kirkwood's statement applied, also, to him. The minds and ambitions of these boys did not appeal to him and how could he ever hope to understand them? They belonged to a new generation that had grown up without his being aware of it. Nevertheless he was stirred, now, by the hope that this one boy, with his kindly air, might possibly serve as an interpreter between him and this new, strange humanity.

'That goes very near the heart of the whole matter, Kirkwood,' he said. 'Very near. It is true that the best literature, while receiving universal recognition, does not make a universal appeal.'

With a relieved mind, he turned back to Hall II. 'Can you grasp that point, Hall?'

'You didn't ask Kirkwood whether literature appealed to him, sir,' Hall replied. He was somewhat jealous of Kirkwood's popularity. It had a quality so different from his own and Kirkwood's father was only a bally shopkeeper. 'He ought to be a fair test, sir,' he added; 'he was born in it, so to speak.'

'You admit *you* weren't, then?' Kirkwood answered without waiting for a ruling from the master.

'I've admitted that, there's a big difference between journalism and literature,' retorted Hall, in the tone of one who would have added 'you ass' on freer ground. 'The point is whether there's much use for the old-fashioned sort of literature nowadays.'

'You seem to have used it in your essay all right,' remarked Kirkwood with a smile.

'Oh! anything was good enough for that,' Hall retorted rudely.

'Even Shakespeare,' interpolated Henry Sercombe. He preferred to overlook the impertinence of Hall's answer. This should be the last lesson he would give. He would explain to Dr Weatherley after school that a more capable exponent must be found for this class in English literature; some younger man who understood this strange new generation.

'By the way, Hall,' he continued, 'where did you find all these apt phrases that you lifted without acknowledgment?'

'Bartlett's dictionary of quotations, sir,' Hall replied promptly.

'Ah! you ought to make quite an able journalist,' was old Sercombe's comment on that. He had lost his fear of Hall. He was free, now, from further responsibility in this particular connection; and he was no longer quite alone in the class-room. He felt that young Kirkwood, in some inexplicable way, understood his position; and the sense of that understanding comforted him.

'Ah! well. . . .' he began again, intending to revert after the long interval, to his interrupted comments on the essays before him; but just then came the sound of a door opening on the corridor, one of the class muttered 'Bell' in an audible undertone, and the prophecy was

immediately afterwards confirmed by the clangour of the bell itself.

Old Sercombe nodded his dismissal of the class.

As the boys filed out, not too noisily, for they were most of them in the upper school and but recently aware of their dignities, he was wondering if he could decently keep back young Kirkwood. Left to himself he would probably have made no effort to achieve his desire. He had always been too sensitively conscious of how such overtures might appear to the object of them. But in this case his problem was solved for him. Kirkwood was quite obviously lingering behind the others.

'Did you want to speak to me, my boy?' was Henry Sercombe's evasion of the responsibility for detaining him. All his life he had been haunted by the knowledge that he shirked his responsibilities.

'You hadn't done my essay, sir,' Kirkwood said. 'Not that it matters a bit, of course, only . . .'

Sercombe looked up and met the boy's singularly candid, earnest gaze.

'You were going to say?' he said, apologetically.

'You see, sir, my father would rather like me to go in for writing and that kind of thing,' Kirkwood explained. 'That's really why I'm attending this class.'

'And you? Do you feel any special leaning that way, yourself?'

'Absolutely none, sir. And I don't think I've any particular ability that way, either. Do you, sir?'

Old Sercombe began to fumble with his spectacles. He was afraid, as always, to give a definite answer to such questions as these. How could he be sure whether the boy had or had not any literary gift?

'Well, well. It's hard to say from the material I have seen,' he prevaricated. 'And, then, well, how old are you now, Kirkwood?'

'Seventeen, sir.'

Old Sercombe made a gesture that conveyed some effect of renunciation. 'Seventeen !' he repeated. 'Well, my dear boy, one can say definitely at least that you are neither a Chatterton nor a Keats—beyond that—well, in ten years' time I might be able to express an opinion.'

Kirkwood's expression was not one of final satisfaction. 'You see, sir,' he began apologetically; 'I would like to prove to my father that there's no chance of me being a writer. I'm—I'm not the sort. I'm quite sure of that. But if you could—in a way—back me up, sir, it would help.'

'Is there any other—profession that appeals to you?' Sercombe asked.

'I believe Mr Dickinson would take me into his office, sir.'

'Dickinson?'

'James Dickinson, sir. The builder.'

'Ah ! yes, to be sure; the builder. And you would like that?'

'It would give me chances, sir; and I should be doing something.'

'You wouldn't prefer to be an—architect, for example?'

Kirkwood was perfectly sure that he would not. He seemed to have an unusually clear recognition of his own limitations for a boy of seventeen. 'It would take so long, sir, with my articles and all that before I could make a living,' he explained. 'And, then, I'm no good at drawing.'

Old Sercombe pushed up his spectacles and rubbed his tired, slightly inflamed eyes. 'If you've made up your mind . . .?' he suggested.

'Yes, sir. I really only wanted you to tell my father that you don't think I'd be any good as a writer. It might relieve his mind. He thinks a lot of your opinion, sir.'

The old man nodded absently. He was thinking of the fussy little bookseller who was given to rather fulsome praise of the half-dozen works in criticism that he, Henry Sercombe, had published in the course of the last thirty years. Little Kirkwood was just the kind of man who would boast his acquaintance with a local celebrity, and who would seek the particular kind of prestige that he imagined might be gained by his son's becoming an author. How did Kirkwood come to have so candid and attractive a son as this, Sercombe wondered? Nevertheless, he fidgeted at the thought of the onus that was being put upon him.

'I—I could only say that you were still too young for me to judge,' he remarked. 'Has he any idea of sending you up to the University?'

'Oh, no, sir. He couldn't afford that,' young Kirkwood said.

Old Sercombe elevated his shaggy gray eyebrows, with the air of asking a question.

'Journalism first, I suppose, sir,' the boy answered with a quiet smile.

The old man's response accepted the implied confidence.

'We can safely leave the future of journalism in the hands of our friend Hall secundus,' he agreed, and went on in the same friendly voice, 'And you want to saddle me with the responsibility of dissuading your father?'

'Please, sir.'

'I shall have to tell the truth, you know.'

'I want you to, sir.'

Henry Sercombe realised that he was surprisingly on the verge of pledging himself to an alliance with young Kirkwood against his father; that he was taking sides with the new generation he had so recently despaired of understanding, against a representative of his own period. He dropped his spectacles and stared curiously

at the immediate cause of this remarkable change in himself.

Until this afternoon, he had not particularly noticed Stephen Kirkwood. He had not stood out from the rest of the class as noticeably differing from the species that the unhappy exponent of English literature had come to think of as 'those dreadful boys.' Kirkwood was less inclined to be obstreperous than some of the others; he looked clean and respectable, but he had had no other distinctive marks, that Sercombe could remember. If he had been asked about him, he would, after making an effort to distinguish his personality from the rabble, have probably replied that he seemed an 'unobnoxious sort of youth.' Could that one look of sympathy, he had seen, have made so much difference that he was now ready definitely to shoulder what he regarded as a serious responsibility in order to help the boy to choose his own occupation?

The habit of a lifetime prompted Henry Sercombe to procrastinate. He fidgeted with his spectacles, again rubbed his tired eyes (young Hall could 'do' that trick to perfection), and then immensely surprised himself by saying:—

'Very well, Kirkwood, I'll come and see your father and do what I can to bring him over to your point of view. Er—you're perfectly sure that this employment at Dickinson's is the best thing you can do?'

'Quite sure, sir. I'm awfully obliged to you, sir,' Stephen Kirkwood replied, with a charming ingenuousness.

After he had gone, old Sercombe suddenly remembered that there was something unusual about the boy's mother. What was it? She was something of a musician in a small way; played accompaniments at concerts occasionally and sang rather well. But had not some one told him, quite lately, an incredible story about her

and Dr Threlfall, the cathedral organist? An incredible story. Why, the woman must be over forty.

'But a nice boy, I should say, an unusually nice boy,' the retiring preceptor murmured aloud to the lonely, resonant spaces of the deserted class-room. 'An honest, gentle face and—and, oddly, for his age—sympathetic. Perhaps I had better continue the class until the end of term.'

2

Stephen was quite certain as he hurried down the empty corridor that the world was a thoroughly satisfactory place to live in. His father, who had been exhibiting signs of that characteristically weak obstinacy of his with regard to his son's choice of profession, must be convinced now. When Stephen had elatedly announced, last Easter, that he had actually been stopped by Mr Dickinson himself in the street, had been asked when he was leaving school, and whether he had ever considered the question of going into the building trade, he had repeated the great news to his father with a tremendous burst of satisfaction. Here, Stephen had thought, was a wonderful opportunity unexpectedly, miraculously sprung from heaven; and he had been perplexed and distressed by his father's reception of the news. He had known that he would have to persuade his mother, she had impossible, transcendental ambitions for him; but he had been certain that he would have his father on his side. And his father had proved unbelievably difficult; had talked queer stuff about Stephen's 'commencing author'; and had finally begged him to attend the new class which the famous—Mr Kirkwood insisted on the adjective—Henry Sercombe was to take at the King's School, next term.

Stephen had consented against his own judgment; and

in the course of the past two months a sense of oppression had been growing upon him. Something within him had inarticulately protested against his conscientious endeavours to submit himself to the idea of this new ambition. The writing of his weekly essay had induced a strange feeling of sick distaste, that he could not explain; a feeling that had seemed in some way to be impersonal, as if, as he had stumblingly tried to put it, 'something simply wouldn't *let* him write.' He had been harassed, too, by a persistent nightmare, quite new in his experience, a nightmare of being confined in some intolerably dark and restricted place from which he struggled desperately to break out. Sometimes he had succeeded and waked with a beautiful sense of relief.

He had something of the same sense of relief now, after his talk in the class-room. With that authority behind him, he felt sure that his father must give way, and he meant to persuade his mother. He had no doubt of his ability to persuade his mother—ultimately. He and she understood each other, he believed—although another wonderful thing had happened to him that day which he had no intention of confiding to her. There were half a dozen good reasons for that, but the chief of them was that in this case she could not be expected to understand.

No one could, except, perhaps, Hall II.—who knew, and was no doubt 'frightfully wild about it.' Stephen was prepared to have to fight Hall in the near future. He had, indeed, a distinct feeling that he would like to fight Hall.

She was only fourteen, the daughter of the head master, but she was an ideal. The boys only saw her once a day, at the school dinner, which was attended by a number of the day boys, as the new school buildings, that had superseded the old school in the cloisters twenty years ago, were a long mile out of the town. She and

her mother, her younger sisters, and their governess, sat at a separate table in the corner of the hall, and this term she had very obviously distracted the attention of perhaps half a dozen of the elder boys. It was a thing understood, but, except in the case of the impossible Mallows, a thing not discussed.

She had been a creature, remote and exquisite, belonging quite obviously to the world of fairies. Such boys as Hall I. or Preston, high up in the school, dared an occasional sheepish glance in her direction now and then; but the only acknowledgment they made of their infatuation was a faint embarrassment if her name happened to be mentioned—it sometimes took the form of smacking the heads of small boys who spoke irreverently. With Nellie Graham, the dashing, exuberant beauty of the town, one, it was admitted, could take liberties in speech. She was well over twenty, and Preston, for example, could be legitimately envied for the boast that he had held her hand during evensong at the Cathedral. Little Miss Margaret Weatherley's personality was sacred to her admirers for two reasons; the first that she was less a human being than an almost religious symbol of the feminine; the second that she was too young.

Stephen had never been an acknowledged member of the select group who had dared the sacrilege of furtive glances at the head master's table. Neither Hall, Mallows, nor Preston had regarded him as a rival, and if Stephen had been openly questioned, he would have said at once that he thought that kind of thing 'all rot.' It was Miss Weatherley herself who had suddenly raised him to a giddy, unstable pinnacle. She had never until to-day been known to show by the least sign that she was aware of any one of the fifty odd boys who shared the dining hall with her for one half-hour every day. Her mother and her governess sat facing the mob, and it was a safe inference that if Margaret had a preference

she would be too discreet to attempt any advertisement of it. And to-day she had perceptibly lingered in leaving the room—most of the boys had already gone when she got up from the table—and had astoundingly smiled at Stephen.

The simple fact, unannounced as it was by any kind of precedent, would have been sufficient to mark the opening of a new era. But as Hall, probably the only witness, knew, the smile had had a very special quality. The fairy had confessed herself mortal. As she had followed at the tail of the female procession towards the mysterious shrine of her father's private house, she had turned round deliberately and hailed the favoured Stephen as a young woman might call to her lover. It had been a beckoning smile, with enough evidence of self-consciousness behind it to give a flavour that was as illicit as it was exciting. Stephen had stood, wonder-struck and blushing. He could not be sure now whether or not he had actually acknowledged her favour by any response in kind—an uncertainty that faintly distressed him. He had been so unprepared, so simply wonder-struck. And before he had had time to recover she was gone, with a little toss of her short skirts and her long hair, that had seemed definitely to place her salute of him as the opening of a fond intrigue.

The most modest and ingenuous of young men must have been bewilderingly flattered. Stephen felt as if he had in, some inexplicable way, been amazingly promoted to high honours. . . .

When he left the class-room, Stephen found Hall II. waiting for him at the entrance to the playground, and braced himself to the quarrel he instinctively anticipated. Hall, however, displayed no sign of ill feeling.

'Hallo!' was his greeting. 'What on earth have you been talking to old Sercombe about all this time?'

Stephen stared at his rival with the least touch of

condescension. 'Oh, I dunno,' he said. 'About me taking up writing for a living.'

'What did he say?' Hall inquired.

'He's promised to tell my father I'm no good at it.'

'You aren't keen, are you?' Hall returned, and added, 'Coming my way, I suppose? Or are you going up to the field?'

'No, I'm going back, now,' Stephen said. He was still puzzled, but Hall's suggestion that they should go together appeared to point an intention of 'having it out' in the comparative solitude of the Park Road—perhaps in the Park itself. Stephen was quite willing, if that were Hall's object.

But Hall soon displayed the astonishing fact that his intentions were pacific, even unusually friendly. After a short silence that carried them out of the school precincts, he opened the only possible topic of importance by saying, with a marked embarrassment:

'She seems to have taken a fancy to you.' He kept his eyes averted from his companion, and sedulously dribbled a loose stone along the path as he continued, 'I just wanted to tell you that I'm out of it, anyway. I've been off it, really, for some time; she's such a frightful *kid*; and I'm rather keen on some one else now; no one *you* know. Of course, none of us had any idea that you were playing that game.'

'But I'm not,' Stephen interrupted. 'I mean I've hardly ever looked at her, even.'

'All serene, keep your hair on,' Hall said, recovering something of his usual aplomb. 'I shan't give you away. I'm not that sort.'

'Nothing to give away,' Stephen mumbled, suddenly aware of a new and distinctly unpleasant aspect of Hall's unconditional resignation. It was true that Stephen's conscience was clear of any reproach, but Hall's account of the episode, now that he had definitely resigned all

ambition of winning the lady's notice, might contain all kinds of implications. His journalistic ability would 'spice' the story, and as a result Stephen would be unmercifully ragged by chaps like Mallows. And Stephen felt that any ragging on that subject would be almost unbearable. He did not delude himself with the notion that he was in any sense 'in love' with little Margaret Weatherley, but her smile had marked him out as her champion. After that, he could not let her name be lightly used by such cad as Mallows.

'Well, you're not going to kid me that you've never spoken to her, in the town or somewhere,' Hall replied.

'I haven't,' Stephen protested indignantly. 'Never once. I tell you I've hardly looked at her, even.'

Hall smiled. 'Well, why did she grin at you, then?' He posed his question with the quiet certainty of one who knows that there can be no adequate reply.

'No idea,' Stephen said.

'That won't work, you know—obviously,' Hall returned.

'I'll swear on my oath I've never spoken to her,' affirmed Stephen with great solemnity.

Hall's handsome, dishonest face still wore the same disingenuous smile as he said, 'Oh, well, of course, if you say so. . . .'

'I'll swear it on anything you like,' Stephen persisted.

'Funny, her grinning at you like that,' Hall commented softly.

Stephen winced at the repetition of that vulgar and inappropriate description of little Miss Weatherley's more than perfect smile. He knew that the use of the unpleasant word was mere brag meant to confirm Hall's statement that he was 'out of it,' that henceforward Margaret Weatherley was nothing to him but 'a kid,' entirely beneath his notice; but to pass the insult without protest seemed like an act of disloyalty.

'She didn't—*grin*,' he muttered savagely.

'Sorry, I forgot,' apologised Hall, with apparent sincerity.

'Forgot what?' Stephen asked.

'Forgot you were so frightfully gone on her.'

Stephen suppressed his inclination to deny that. Three hours before he would have scorned the idea with careless contempt. Now he was not so sure. He returned to the main issue.

'Perfectly rotten of you if you were to sneak to Preston or Mallows, or any one,' he said.

'I've told you I wouldn't,' Hall replied with an unconvincing warmth.

'You swear,' Stephen insisted.

'Rather, of course,' Hall agreed.

They had reached the bottom of Park Road, and at Westgate their ways diverged.

'I should think you could trust me not to do a rotten thing like that,' Hall said as they paused.

Stephen looked him straight in the eyes, and his stare was returned with a self-conscious defiance.

'I should have to jolly well lick you, if you did, you know,' Stephen said.

Hall's stare wavered. 'Don't be a silly cuckoo,' he protested sheepishly.

'Well, I should,' Stephen persisted.

'If you could, of course,' sneered Hall.

'Oh, I could all right,' Stephen said. Every one knew that Hall was rather a funk.

'Good Lord, what's all the fuss about?' Hall replied. 'Haven't I sworn I wouldn't say anything?'

Hall was commonly known at school as 'rat,' a nickname that he had earned by his habit of biting the tips of his fingers; but it occurred to Stephen at this moment that the description might have other applications. There was something very shifty about young Hall.

And his elder brother, an overgrown lout of nearly nineteen, was an awful beast.

3

Mr Kirkwood was alone in the shop when Stephen went in. A kind of general understanding existed that he should not enter the house by that route, but ringing at the side door involved bringing some one down from the first floor to let him in, and in practice he almost invariably entered by the shop. On this particular afternoon, however, his father appeared to resent the accustomed breach of etiquette.

'Couldn't you make any one hear?' he asked, on a note of complaint.

'Didn't try as a matter of fact, father,' Stephen answered. 'Does it matter?' He paused slightly before he added, 'Ada's day out, too. All the same, I generally come in this way. Do you mind?'

Mr Kirkwood was bending over a ledger. 'It isn't of much consequence when there are no customers here,' he mumbled. 'You'd better get on with your tea. I don't know if your mother's in or not. I shall have to wait until Green comes back. He's gone with a couple of parcels. He shouldn't be long, now.'

Stephen accepted his dismissal, passed through the shop into the room behind, used as a combination of store-room for extra stock and 'counting-house,' and so through a side door into the passage that led to the house door and up the stairs to what was always spoken of as 'the house.'

He found his two sisters having tea in the kitchen.

They wore an air of breaking off a conversation as he came in, although they must have heard him coming up the stairs.

'Hallo! where's mother?' Stephen asked.

Emily, the elder girl, looked up at her brother with her habitual intent stare. Up to the age of fifteen, she had peered at life with uncertain, short-sighted eyes. Until then no one had realised the handicap under which she laboured. But after rather powerful glasses had brought her the gift of ordinary vision, she peered no longer. 'It's such a comfort to be able to see,' was her common expression of relief. And it seemed as if for the last five years she had tried to see all she could. Strangers often found her immensely steady stare rather embarrassing.

'She isn't in the house,' she said in answer to her brother's question. 'Wasn't she in the shop?'

Stephen shook his head. 'Father said I wasn't to wait for him,' he said. 'Green's out somewhere with parcels. Where's mother gone?'

'I've no idea,' Emily replied, with an effect of ominous solemnity. 'I've only been in a quarter of an hour.'

'She went out soon after three,' volunteered Hilda. 'She said she was going to the Cathedral.'

'Well, why shouldn't she?' inquired Stephen brusquely.

'No reason that I know of,' Hilda replied.

'Why "she *said* she was going," then?'

'Well, she can't have been at the Cathedral all this time,' Hilda returned. 'It's half-past five.'

'Sh! here's father coming,' whispered Emily, with a kind of suppressed violence.

Stephen frowned. 'What on earth's all the mystery about?' he asked fretfully. He had noticed that his sisters had lately started a habit of speaking with a veiled innuendo about his mother's doings, a habit that he found increasingly annoying.

'Who said there was any mystery?' Emily inquired, with her dominating stare, posing the question as if she were examining her class at the National School and

was very intent on forcing some unfortunate examinee into an obvious mis-statement.

'Well,' Stephen began, and then shrugged his shoulders as the sound of his father's step reached the landing. 'I don't mean there *is* any mystery, only what you and Hilda try to make out,' he concluded hastily, in order to get his case clear before he was interrupted.

Mr Kirkwood came into the room with a melancholy air.

'Tea in the kitchen to-day?' he inquired, as he took his seat at the head of the table.

'Ada's day out, father,' Hilda explained perfunctorily.

Mr Kirkwood had adopted the theory that he was very absent-minded, but neither of his daughters had the least faith in it.

'To be sure, so it is,' he agreed carelessly, and for a few minutes the meal progressed unenlivened by conversation. The bookseller's demeanour suggested that he was immersed in a brown study, and wished the fact to be clearly understood.

It was Stephen who interrupted his father's meditations.

'Mr Sercombe's coming to see you one day soon, father,' he said.

Mr Kirkwood looked up at his son as if he dimly remembered having seen him before somewhere.

'Who did you say?' he asked.

'Mr Sercombe, father,' Stephen repeated. 'I had a long talk with him to-day about my becoming a writer.'

'And his advice was?'

'He said he hadn't seen any marks of genius yet.'

'Well, you didn't expect him to, did you?' Emily inquired.

'I didn't,' Stephen said.

His father sighed emphatically. 'You've set your

mind against becoming an author, Stephen,' he remarked.

'Got no gift that way, you see,' his son explained.

'How can you tell yet?' Hilda put in.

'Negatively, you can,' Stephen responded. 'I mean if you're going to suffer from *cacœthes scribendi*, the symptoms show pretty early.'

'Not always,' Mr Kirkwood commented. 'Neither De Quincey nor Charles Lever began to write until they were over thirty.'

'Well, but, father,' Stephen pleaded, 'if the symptoms develop later, I could begin just as well then like De Quincey or Lever.'

His father sighed again, patiently this time, and was apparently preparing to explain away his oversight in having quoted a bad precedent for his own case, when they heard the house door slam with vigour.

'Did your mother have the latch-key?' Mr Kirkwood asked quickly.

'I don't know that she did, but that's *her* right enough,' Hilda replied cheerfully.

For a moment they sat in silence, listening, until the sound of another door closing reached them.

'Gone to take her hat off. She'll be in, in a minute,' Hilda unnecessarily explained.

Emily jumped up, took the teapot, and went over to the range.

They were all suddenly more alert, more alive than they had been a minute before. Some vitalising spirit seemed to have entered into them with the slamming of the house door.

4

Less than a year ago, the Kirkwoods had been to all outward appearances an unusually united family. They

bickered less among themselves, they were more bound by a common interest, than the members of an average family of their class. But in the course of the past ten months they had ceased to be a family and become a group of individuals; although they were not yet aware of the great change in their relations to one another. Each of them had a secret, and it was the same secret; but while all of them suspected that the others knew, only the two girls, Emily and Hilda, had dared to whisper together of the dreadful fear that was shaking them.

The bond that had held them so closely together and was now so alarmingly relaxed, was a common admiration. Cecilia Kirkwood was no romantic prototype of motherhood. Of her three children only Stephen truly loved her, and even his devotion had wavered during the uncertainties of the last few weeks. But she had an astonishing gift of begetting and retaining admiration. In the town she was regarded with a curious mixture of respect and suspicion which was Medboro's manner of concealing an admiration it dared not openly display. Medboro', as a cathedral city, held all artists to be suspect; and Mrs Kirkwood aggravated the offence by being an artist married to a perfectly respectable bookseller in the Long Causeway. The combination was frankly a contradiction of all probability, and the town did not believe in improbabilities.

Another reason for the town's suspicion was added by the fact that Mrs Kirkwood had the bad taste to look ten years younger than her age. The cloisters, with their nice respect for the accepted decencies of life, regarded it as improper for a woman of over forty with a grown-up family not only to dress but to look as if she were thirty-five or less. After more than twenty years of married life, she ought to have lost her figure, her

prettiness, and most certainly her vivacity. Other women in the same circumstances looked respectably more than their age, and it was Mrs Kirkwood's Christian duty to do as other women did. The cloisters and the town, as represented by feminine opinion, never said these things openly, but they thought them, and on discreet occasions even hinted them.

Then again, Mrs Kirkwood had an air—possibly due in part to that suspicious artistry of hers—of being a foreigner. English women over forty living in the provinces, do not walk about the town with their heads in the air, do not laugh gaily in public places, nor, generally, go about as if they thoroughly enjoyed life. There was only one inference possible; she did these things to attract attention, and, almost sinfully, succeeded.

Nevertheless, Medboro', however grudgingly and surreptitiously, admired Mrs Kirkwood.

Her own family had certainly set the town a good example. Her husband and her two daughters had never aspired to do more than serve as a chorus to her. From the beginning—little Kirkwood from the days of his astounding engagement, and his daughters from their earliest realisations of terrestrial values,—had recognised the fact that she was inimitable. Any attempt to copy either her method or her manner only made them ridiculous. She had been for them a source of idolatry rather than a model. If their recognition of her superiority had been less marked, they might have loved her more truly.

Even her son, though he had known her better than the others, had been over-inclined to adoration; and she had permitted it. There had been moments when she had longed for a truer intimacy with him, but her insatiable temperament, always thirsty for applause, had proved too strong for her. She had sometimes consoled herself with the thought that destiny, in setting her

apart from life, was holding some greater achievement in reserve. Not until she was forty-one had she fallen passionately, humanly, in love. It seemed to her, then, that never before had she met her superior. . . .

She came in now to the kitchen, with her usual air of vivacious interest in the little affairs of the family God had lent her.

'My dears, I hope you haven't waited for me,' she said. 'Dr Threlfall has been giving me an organ-lesson in the Cathedral, and I felt so splendid up there rolling out the *Missa Brevis*, I simply couldn't come away. Though, of course, I can't play it with my silly hands.' She looked down with a serious contempt at her beautiful hands, so brilliant and mobile, but so small that she could never properly master a series of full chords on the octave. 'It's about ten times worse on the organ than it is on the piano,' she added.

Her eyes were bright with the joy of living, but she had mentioned the name of her lover without the least appearance of self-consciousness. It was such evidences as these, eagerly watched for by her daughters, that still inspired them with the hope that their incomprehensible mother was safe from ultimate disaster.

'Oh ! I wish I'd been there,' Hilda said eagerly. 'You might have told me, mother. I've been all alone in the house since you went out.'

'Yes, and who would have got tea for our two men and Emily,' her mother replied; 'if you'd been attending my murder of Palestrina?'

'I could easily have got back in time for that,' Hilda said.

'I'll take my next lesson when it isn't Ada's day out,' Mrs Kirkwood consoled her. 'Only don't say anything about it, because it's just possible the Dean might object to my playing the Cathedral organ. Well, what's the news, dears, all this long time?' She looked at

Stephen, but it was her husband who answered. He had something to say, and they were always so glad when they could feed her with anything like real news.

'Mr Sercombe's coming up to see me about Stephen,' he said. 'They've fixed it up between 'em, seemingly, that he's not to be an author.'

Stephen shook his head. 'There was no question of fixing it up, mother,' he submitted.

The firm curves of Mrs Kirkwood's mouth lifted to a rather quizzical smile. 'Stephen!' she adjured him; 'admit you're trying to back out!'

He answered her smile but with a greater gravity. 'Mr Sercombe agrees it's no good,' he said.

'You've been persuading him,' she returned, 'pleading with those serious eyes of yours to be allowed to go and play with your horrid bricks and mortar.'

'Really, I haven't, mother,' Stephen said. 'Mr Sercombe said if he came he'd have to tell father the truth, and I told him that was just what I wanted him to do.'

His mother looked as if she hadn't heard Stephen's defence. Her dark blue eyes were still turned towards him but her attention was withdrawn. It was as if her expression marked her place in the conversation, like a finger thrust into a book she was no longer reading.

'I see,' she remarked with an unnecessary gravity, and instantly turned to her husband and continued, 'I met Arthur in the Square. He and your sister are coming round after supper—to talk or something. I asked him to bring some music.'

Little Kirkwood looked a trifle disconcerted. 'To talk?' he said. 'What about?'

'He didn't say,' his wife replied. She and her husband were watching each other as if they tried to search the other's defences while guarding their own safety.

'Was Eleanor with him?' he asked.

'No.'

'But he said she was coming? To talk? Was that exactly what he said?'

'He said, I believe, that he and Eleanor might very likely look in after supper to-night, and that she wanted to have a talk with you. He said distinctly with *you*; and he looked at me over the top of his gold spectacles to see how I should take it. And I said, "Oh, do. Bring some music, won't you?" He was just leaving the Bank.'

'Aunt Eleanor,' Emily began, and then stopped. Her mother was obviously not listening. She was leaning her elbows on the table and pressing a little slip of a muslin handkerchief against her lips. She looked as if she were bracing herself to some great trial of the spirit, and had forgotten the presence of the four other people about her.

The shadow they so persistently avoided was suddenly taking a visible shape. It was there with them in the room as an acknowledged presence. They watched her for a moment, and then hastily attempted to occupy themselves. They were confused and nervous, afraid to meet each other's eyes, lest any sign of a common recognition of the shadow might add one tittle of evidence against her. It seemed to them that if once their fear was admitted and shared, it would become a reality that could never again be denied.

The little bookseller noisily pushed back his chair and stood up. 'Well, I'm sure we'll be very glad to see them,' he said. 'We haven't been overburdened with their company lately.'

His wife turned her eyes towards him without changing her pose. 'I expect Arthur will bring some music,' she said, as if she offered some consolation.

For the moment they were released. The two girls

also stood up and began to clear away the tea things. Mr Kirkwood, after a short hesitation, went downstairs to the shop.

For a few seconds after he had gone, Stephen and his mother still sat opposite to one another at the table. The girls had taken a tray full of crockery into the combination of pantry and scullery that led out of the kitchen. As they left the room, Stephen looked up at his mother with a quick glance of inquiry, and for a instant their spirits met in a perfect understanding.

'Not yet, little boy, not yet,' she said, and then, breaking the liaison, left him puzzled still, but a trifle comforted.

'It's no business of Aunt Eleanor's, anyway,' was the thought with which he expressed the conviction of the family.

But indeed it was the business of the whole town of Medboro'! Mrs Kirkwood had compelled its admiration too long, and already a relieved sense of reaction was flaming about the streets and licking at the doors of great houses in the precincts.

The owners of Medboro' had made many allowances, but when it came to using the Cathedral as a rendezvous they must really insist on the thing being put a stop to.

'She was up there alone with him in the organ loft of the Cathedral this afternoon for two hours or more,' was the report that was burning up the town's last trickle of championship for their one artist.

Every one knew.

And, after all, she was not, properly speaking, a native of Medboro'. Her father, Handel Edwards, the agnostic, sunken now to the indignities of piano-tuning, had brought her to the town when she was sixteen. They had come from the North originally; Leeds or somewhere.

5

Eleanor Bell, Andrew Kirkwood's sister, was a little anxious-eyed woman of forty-five, who still retained an appearance of pinched prettiness. Her life had been spent in responding to the urgent call of convention. As a church worker and Sunday School teacher before her marriage, and later as the wife of Arthur Bell and the mother of her two daughters, she had untiringly modelled herself on the pattern proper to one who aspired to rank one degree higher than her actual status.

Her husband, although less preoccupied with a single ambition, had nevertheless shared her aspiration. He had started life as a choir-boy, and had, in virtue of his vocation, received a free education at the King's School. He was now manager of the City and County, perhaps the most important bank in Medboro', and was counted a person of social importance, admittedly higher than that of the average shopkeeper, and something lower than that of the learned professions.

It was to this latter level that Mrs Bell aspired. She longed to move in the circle of those doctors, solicitors, and minor clergy, whose circle in its turn cut into the farther, finally select circle of the Precincts ; with the Bishop's wife, Lady Constance Olivier, at its ideal centre. Mrs Bell's movement towards the achievement of this ambition had been noticeably assisted by her husband's musical ability. He was leader of the celebrated quartette of men's voices which included as its incomparable alto the person of plump little Adam Neale, managing clerk for Mr Folliett, the town's chief solicitor, who did all the cathedral business and whose grandfather had been Bishop of Medborough from 1829 to 1843. Neale, it was reported, would one day be taken into partnership with his employer, who had not his father's ability; and

so another step on the difficult ladder of ascent might be taken by Mr Neale's most intimate friends, the Bells.

And now Mrs Bell's whole future was being threatened by this growing rumour of scandal about her incomprehensible sister-in-law. 'Something ought to be said to her,' Mrs Bell maintained to her husband, but she continually put off saying it, herself, because she lacked the moral courage. She did not for a moment believe that Mrs Kirkwood would do anything 'actually wrong'; women in Mrs Bell's circle did not do these things; but all these meetings with Dr Threlfall gave people the chance to talk; and to do that showed a terrible incapacity to appreciate the true worth of life. Mrs Bell, in fact, had made up her mind to 'say something' to her brother, even before her husband brought the report of the desecration of the Cathedral on that Friday afternoon. He had had it, after his meeting with Mrs Kirkwood, from Adam Neale.

Mrs Bell announced her disturbance by the abstracted kiss with which she greeted her niece Emily, when she opened the door. It was a kiss intended to mark a general effect of disapproval, for despite her announced intention of speaking definitely to her brother, she still hoped that a general effect of disapproval might be enough to fulfil her purpose. She never made 'scenes.' She disliked emotional displays of any kind, and her method of persuading her husband, when he proved in any way refractory, was the method of quiet, almost sweet, persistence. When she had wanted the new drawing-room suite they could not afford, it had figured in her conversation as a steady undercurrent for eighteen months. During that period, Arthur Bell could count with absolute certainty on his wife's apology for their present furniture, whenever they had a visitor.

On this occasion, she had made some preparation for the staging of her effect by requesting her husband not

to bring any music. She saw that omission as signifying a certain formality; and her idea of the evening's occupation was a discreet conversation—relating chiefly to their own position in the town—into which she saw opportunities of introducing a series of hints with reference to the reprehensibility of getting 'talked about.'

Her entrance admirably set the note of her intention. She came into her sister-in-law's sitting-room with an air of restrained sadness, sat rather apart from the others when she had conceded the usual formalities of greeting, and took no part in the opening conversation.

Stephen was upstairs doing his home-work—examinations were to begin the week after next—and Mr Kirkwood found a preliminary topic in a re-discussion of his son's career.

Arthur Bell listened sympathetically, but expressed the opinion that Stephen could not do better than go into the office of James Dickinson.

'He's probably the richest man in the town,' Bell said, 'with the exception of Mr Spentwater.' His profession had made him a trifle too apt to judge a man by the quality of his balance and investments.

Mrs Bell saw her first opportunity at this point.

'He might have been Mayor if it hadn't been for his wife's failing,' she put in.

Her husband looked a trifle uncomfortable. His long practice of absolute discretion with regard to his depositors' affairs had induced a habit of distaste for anything approaching public scandal. He slightly adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles and frowned absent-mindedly at the piano.

'Drinks, doesn't she?' remarked Cecilia.

She was sitting on the music-stool, wearing an almost girlish dress of sprigged muslin. Her demeanour, since the entrance of her husband's relations, had been, however, anything but girlish. She had hardly spoken since

they came, and her whole air was that of one primed to resent the least allusion to her recent conduct.

'Oh! well, well,' the bank manager answered; 'we can't say that for certain. Some people have insinuated that—er—well—that there was some kind of trouble.'

'People will, you know, if you give them the least chance,' Mrs Bell said demurely.

'Nothing else to talk about,' Cecilia commented.

'So very unfortunate in every way,' Mrs Bell remarked, rather allusively.

Cecilia stared at her sister-in-law for one moment as if she dared her to say another word, and then turned to Bell and asked him why he had not, after all, brought any music.

He excused himself on the grounds of being rather tired.

'Too tired for music, but not too tired to come all the way up here and spend the evening. . . .' Cecilia's tone indicated that her sentence was incomplete, and they waited a moment in embarrassed silence, for her to fill in the description of how the evening was to be spent. The rising inflection of her voice foreshadowed the coming of resentment—perhaps against the boredom of futile conversation indirectly designed to warn her back to the comfortable ways of propriety.

But she added nothing to her indictment. She sat poised on the music-stool, gripping the seat of it with her hands, and staring across the room with a look of set determination at the mirror over the fireplace.

Mrs Bell coughed gently. 'We felt that we had been rather neglecting you lately,' she said on a note of conciliation; 'and as Arthur had seen you this afternoon and made the appointment, I thought we had better keep to it, even if he was a little tired.'

'To be sure, to be sure. Very kind,' murmured Mr Kirkwood.

'All the same if you'd play us something, Cicely,' Bell added nervously. He felt, as indeed they all did, that in Mrs Kirkwood's present mood, an unfortunate outburst might occur at any minute. 'My not bringing any music,' he went on more bravely, 'was after all, you know, nothing more than an intimation that I didn't feel up to doing anything particularly, myself; I'll admit that nothing rests me more than listening to really good music.'

'It would be so nice if you would play us something,' his wife concurred. Surely the moral effect of this visit, she consoled herself, would do some good.

Cecilia seemed to disengage her thoughts from the mirror by a strong effort. 'What would you like?' she asked her sister-in-law.

Mrs Bell blushed and looked at her husband. Her own taste in music was, she knew, a little common. The only composers she could remember just then were Mozart and Strauss, and she was not quite sure whether either of them would be the 'right' person to ask for.

'No, I asked *you*, Eleanor,' Cecilia prompted her mischievously, before Bell could reply. 'Your choice is much more likely to suit Andrew and the girls. Stephen is the only one of our family who can tell Bach from Beethoven.'

Mrs Bell simpered. 'A little Strauss, perhaps,' she suggested gently.

Cecilia nodded, turned round to the piano, and flung herself into a brilliant execution of one of Dvořák's dances.

Bell pulled himself together with a little start as she began, and then frowned gravely at his wife. He did not wish her to be trapped into making a fool of herself, and he knew that she was quite capable of taking Dvořák for Strauss. He thought Cecilia's trick in very bad taste.

Mrs Bell imagined that the frown was meant to convey disapproval of her choice of composer, and the slight shrug of the shoulders with which she answered her husband, left him still uneasy as to the state of her understanding. He determined to expose the fraud, himself, the moment Cecilia paused; but she saved him the necessity. The instant she had finished, she swung round on the stool and apologised to her sister-in-law.

'Sorry, Eleanor,' she said, 'but I didn't feel in the mood for Strauss.'

Mrs Bell rose to the occasion. She may, perhaps, have been perplexed by so unusual a version of the waltz she had been expecting, and although she would probably not have had the courage to venture the opinion that Dvořák was not Strauss, she was at least prepared.

'What you gave us was quite delightful,' she murmured. 'That particular dance of Dvořák's isn't often played,' Bell commented quickly.

'Too rebellious,' Cecilia replied at once. 'That was why I played it to-night.'

She got up from the music-stool, walked quickly over to the fireplace and remained standing there leaning one elbow on the mantelpiece as she continued:—

'Have you ever felt rebellious, Eleanor?'

'I suppose every one does at times,' Mrs Bell said. 'It's just one of those feelings one has to suppress.'

'Why?' Cecilia asked sharply.

Mrs Bell bowed her head a little, as if she were humbly interpreting some splendid religious principle. 'I'm afraid the world would be a dreadful place to live in if we didn't,' she said.

'But what I can't understand,' Cecilia returned, disregarding that answer, 'is why, at least, we can't be honest.'

Mr Bell coughed. No one, he believed, could impeach his honesty.

'Why, for instance,' Cecilia went on, with an impatient gesture, 'should you and Arthur pretend that you didn't come here to-night to—to tell me—or Andrew—that I must really behave myself in future? Obviously you did. Why make all kinds of excuses and evasions, and hint things instead of saying them? Is it because you're afraid, or because you don't really believe I'm doing any harm by seeing Dr Threlfall so often?'

Mrs Bell contented herself by looking at once shocked and demure.

Her husband displayed more courage. He had often had more difficult situations than this to handle in his management of the Bank's affairs. He slightly adjusted his glasses, looked firmly at his antagonist, and assumed the inflexible sternness he wore when refusing an overdraft.

'As you've opened the subject, Cecilia,' he said gravely, 'I am glad to take this opportunity to say that Eleanor and I think you are being very ill-advised in seeing so much of Dr Threlfall. We are, of course, convinced that your intentions are perfectly innocent, but you give the town an opportunity to gossip—which is a very great pity.'

'I suppose you've heard about this afternoon?' Cecilia replied quietly.

'Yes, I did,' Bell said. 'After I had met you, however. I consider that—incident deplorable, in every way. The Dean will certainly be extremely vexed if he hears of it.'

'And supposing,' Cecilia said, with a great calmness, 'supposing that my, our, intentions were not perfectly innocent?'

Up to that moment, her own family had been content, as always, to act as a kind of almost mute chorus to her star performance. When there were visitors to be entertained the two girls waited on their mother's mood,

and if she were inclined to talk they sat in silence. They knew that they could not compete with her. But, now, in a sentence, she had dangerously strained an allegiance that for the past few months had been very hardly tried.

It was Emily who answered that daring challenge.

'Mother! How can you say such things?' she said, in her even, sedate way.

'Are you afraid it might be true, Emily?' Cecilia asked, turning her head a little to look down at her two daughters, tucked together into the sofa set across the corner by the fireplace.

'No, of course not, mother,' Emily returned.

Cecilia straightened herself, standing, now, erect on the hearthrug as if she were on a platform about to sing, as she commonly did, with no score in her hands. They watched her, then, with an increasing fear that she might be going to make some scandalous announcement. She so dominated them. She held them in expectancy, as she sometimes held her audiences; so sure of her own power not only to please, but even to compel her hearers to like just what she chose to give them.

When at last she spoke, she looked over their heads. 'I will *not* be interfered with,' she said in a clear steady voice. 'So please make up your minds to that—all of you. I can't help your criticising me or talking about me, but you must keep it to yourselves. I shall go my own way whatever you say or think.' She paused before she added in the same tone, 'And now I'm going to bed. I don't feel in the mood for music or conversation to-night. Good-night, Arthur. Good-night, Eleanor. It was good of you to come up.'

She did not offer to shake hands with them. She left the room with a little flutter of haste as if she dared trust herself no further.

'You ought to use your authority, Andrew,' his sister said as soon as the door was closed.

Little Kirkwood's hands were trembling visibly.

'Authority, Eleanor?' he quavered. 'You ought to know well enough that I've never had any authority over her.'

He had apparently no shame in making that statement in the hearing of his two daughters.

'You simply can't say anything of that sort to mother, aunt,' Emily agreed.

'I don't believe the Bishop himself could,' added Hilda.

With a common movement, the father and his two daughters were drawing together to defend her. The secret was still safe. She had only been threatening them. There was still a hope that she would not finally betray them all.

Now that Cicely was gone, Mrs Bell found her voice. But all her scolding, and indeed all the rest of that evening's conversation in the bookseller's sitting-room, was no more than an embroidery of the original theme.

Mrs Bell thought it so 'unwise' to give the gossips of the town 'the least opportunity.'

'In any case, she must understand that the cathedral is sacred,' was her husband's chief contribution.

'But, Uncle Arthur, she is really having organ lessons,' was Emily's confession of a renewed fealty.

Uncle Arthur set his lips sternly. 'You see, Andrew,' he said, disregarding his niece; 'the point is that the organ was hardly played at all. Simpson, the verger, told Adam Neale.'

Cecilia did not go to bed when she fled the company of the repulsed evangelists, she went straight up to Stephen's room at the top of the house. He was reading in the accepted schoolboy attitude, with his elbows on

the table and his hands over his ears; and he looked up with an expression that boasted his diligence when his mother came in.

'I say, mother, you don't want me to come down?' he said.

Cecilia shook her head.

'They haven't gone, have they?' he asked in surprise, and looked at his watch. 'Why, they haven't been here much over half an hour.'

'They haven't gone,' Cecilia replied, shutting the door. 'I've left them to gossip. I want to talk to you, Stephen. Put your book away.'

He marked his place with a slip of paper and obediently closed his book.

'About my going to Mr Dickinson's?' he asked mechanically.

Something in the manner of her coming had already warned him that this visit to him had been made for some more intense purpose than the discussion of his profession. Outwardly she appeared calm and collected, but some emotion seemed to radiate from her. His little room had been transformed by her presence from a schoolboy's study to the stage of a dramatic encounter.

She may have been aware of some necessity for making this change; or it may only have been her natural need for facing the light that induced her, before she began to talk to him, to remove the green shade he had made for his little round-wicked 'opaline' china lamp.

She took no notice of his question. 'Now I can see you,' she said, but it was more probably that she had wanted him to be able to see her.

'What is it, mother?' he asked, with a hint of trepidation in his voice.

She had seated herself on his bed, in much the same attitude in which she had posed herself on the music-stool; her body very upright, her arms hanging straight

down with an effect of tensivity. But now her preoccupied gaze at the mirror had given place to an earnest, searching inquiry of her son's face.

'I *must* tell some one, Stephen,' she said; 'and there's only you. Will you be very patient with me?'

'Is it—is it about—Dr Threlfall?' he asked timidly.

'Oh! but there are reams and reams before that, if you are ever to understand in the very least,' she said.

'Take it as a story, my dear; a long one, but you ought to know it, because you are another chapter yourself. Perhaps you'll be the most important chapter, but all the same my own little adventure isn't finished yet.'

Her dark blue eyes were watching the attentive eyes of her son, so like her own, yet with that indefinable difference that stamped them as essentially masculine.

'If you'd been a daughter, Stephen,' she said, breaking off her prologue, and then, anticipating his answer, she pursed her mouth and shook her head. 'No, no, not like Emily and Hilda,' she exclaimed. 'They're Kirkwoods, they're nearly all Kirkwood. They accept. They submit. They've accepted me, just as your father did. They don't understand me; they've hung me up on the wall like an ikon—you know those religious pictures the Russians have—something to be admired and revered and wondered at. And now I'm going to fall down with a bang, and there'll be a mess of broken glass that they'll have to pick up and clear away very carefully for fear of cutting themselves. You know that's what they'll do, don't you, dear? And the silly old picture will have to be shut away in a dark cupboard somewhere; and it will get more and more like a skeleton every day.'

'But, mother, you don't mean to say that you're going to . . .?' Stephen interrupted.

'Oh! the story, the story first, little boy,' she said. 'I can't answer any questions till I've told you that.'

Her tone was becoming more confident. She had 'got her audience' as she was wont to boast; and she had no doubt of her own powers as a *raconteuse*. She had told stories from the stage before now, to fill a gap, and people had told her that that was her true *métier*. But, up to this time, she had been faithful to her first love—to music, although no one knew better than she that she could never reach any height of achievement, either as a singer or a pianist. She often referred to herself as 'a third-rate professional.'

'But, mother . . .' Stephen still protested. He felt that he could not listen to any 'story' until he knew the truth she had now so definitely threatened.

She knew better than that. She meant to fling her enchantment over him, the magic of her personality. 'You can't understand till you know everything, dear,' she pleaded. 'And I want you to understand. You must understand. You're the only one who can, and I want to keep you.'

Stephen looked down and began to fidget with the cover of his Trigonometry. 'Very well, mother, go on,' he said. Nothing but the detail was lacking, after all. He could no longer doubt that the dreaded disaster was now imminent. In his heart he was cursing the image of Dr Threlfall.

She played with his attention by keeping him waiting for still another minute before she began. It was by such tricks as these that she tested the quality of her own power. She liked, as she put it, 'to make it harder' for herself; but only when she was perfectly sure of winning. She never attempted to play a losing game.

'I can't go as far back as I should like to,' was her opening, 'because I don't know who our ancestors were earlier than the end of the eighteenth century. But my great-grandfather, Stephen, was a baker who had a shop on Holborn Hill, and he was nearly hung by the

crowd in the Gordon Riots. The story is that he tried to stop them from burning Newgate Prison. Have you ever read *Barnaby Rudge*?’

Stephen nodded.

‘Don’t look so puzzled, little boy,’ she said. ‘I only want you to know that your great-great-grandfather must have been a very brave little man. And so was his son, my grandfather. He was a Chartist, and went to prison for his opinions—at Liverpool, I think. And then there’s my father. He was the organist of St Barnabas’ Church in Leeds, you know, and he had a lot of pupils and we were quite comfortably off. And then he found that he didn’t believe in religion, and gave up his position as organist and lost most of his pupils, because he wouldn’t pretend; and we came here and were dreadfully poor. That was when I was sixteen.

‘You see, I want you to know just that much of your mother’s family history, dear; so that you may understand that I come of a rebellious family. And I was a rebel, too; when I married your father. My father was tremendously against it; oh! passionately—he used to be very passionate in those days—it’s twenty-two years ago now. And, Stephen, it’s a dreadful confession, but it has to come, I should never have married your father if my father hadn’t been so set against it. He warned me. He told me I should never be happy. He explained exactly how I should feel in a few years time. And the more he argued with me, the more rebellious I got. It’s in my blood, I suppose. And, Stephen, for twenty-one years I have really kept going on my rebellion against my father’s opinion. I was so determined to prove that he was wrong and I was right, although I’ve known for twenty years that it was the other way round. Have you got enough of me in you to understand that?’

Stephen was gnawing the end of a pencil. ‘Do you

mean to say, mother, that you've always been unhappy since you married father?' he asked.

'Heavens, no, child,' she flung at him. 'I couldn't live if I couldn't find happiness for myself somehow. But I have never been satisfied, and if it hadn't been for my pride in proving myself right I might have,' she threw up her hands with a sudden gesture of abandonment, 'oh, I should surely have tossed my bonnet over some windmill or other before this. You see it was only father that counted. His was the only opinion that mattered to me in all Medboro'. He and I were so different from all the others, that they've always seemed to me nothing more than an audience.'

'Have you told grandfather now?' Stephen put in.

She shook her head. 'You're the first, dear,' she said.

'But you haven't told *me* yet,' Stephen expostulated. His voice trembled a little. He was seventeen and he stood a good chance of taking the form prize in the Lower Sixth this term. But he had a horrible premonition that he would not get through this confession without crying.

'I'm telling you now,' she returned, with a little jerk of impatience, and she got up from the bed and began to pace the very narrow limits of Stephen's bedroom. 'Only I can never, never explain to you,' she went on suddenly, facing round and confronting him—'not while you sit there as gloomy as a rock. It's sympathy I'm asking you for, little son, sympathy and understanding.'

She frowned at him, as if she were meeting some incomprehensible opposition and was uncertain how to pitch her note.

'Do you think that you know anything whatever about me, dear?' she asked.

He could find no answer to that question. He was not sure that he did know anything of this new mother

of his, who had come to life in the last few months. With all his adoration of her, he had still taken her so much for granted. Unconsciously he had placed her, broadly, in the category of motherhood. She was different, admittedly, from all other mothers, but he had assumed, nevertheless, that all mothers were in some way alike. Now, with this new and calamitous revelation hanging over him, he had to amend his generalisation. It seemed that she was less a mother than a distinctly perplexing young woman.

'Nothing at all?' she prompted him.

'I—I thought I did; until lately,' he said.

'Are you jealous, Stephen?' she asked.

He propped his face in his hands and stared down at the tablecloth. 'No,' he mumbled, 'that would be idiotic. I just hate Dr Threlfall, that's all.'

She drew a deep breath and threw back her head. For a moment she seemed to admit defeat, then she began to talk rapidly as if she would make him forget what he had said. 'I'm like those plants that turn towards the light,' she began. 'I must have light and air and freedom. And I had them in a way, or thought I had, until he came here last February. You see you don't know him, Stephen. I want you to know him, well. You shall, you must. He's so big. He understands—all sorts of things, not only music. He's creative. He—oh! hearing and seeing him has made me realise that I was shut into a dark little stuffy room. I must get out, now. Everything has altered. I've seen it all for the first time as what it is. This town, these people, the whole atmosphere of the place.'

'Then you're going right away?' Stephen interrupted her, with the sound of dismay in his voice.

This was the crucial question she had tried to postpone until such time as she had won his sympathy. But that task was proving unexpectedly difficult. She had spoken

only of herself and she was beginning to understand that the time had come for her to make concessions to him. He, also, had a point of view, and she had too lightly overlooked the necessity for deferring to it.

She came back to the bed, and sat down again, so near to him that she could touch him by leaning forward.

'Does my going away seem—the end of everything, Stephen?' she asked gently. 'Tell me, dear, I've been rather up in the clouds lately.'

'Is it—is it absolutely necessary—for *you* to go away?' he said.

'Absolutely necessary—for a hundred reasons,' she replied, in a low voice. She was prepared to be humble now.

'But, mother; it seems so—so awful,' he protested.

'Does it? To you? Yes, I dare say it does,' she admitted. 'But we have only one life, Stephen, and I've done my duty for twenty-two years; given all my best time to you and Andrew and the girls.'

He did not weigh that statement against the earlier boast that her rectitude had been largely upheld by her determination to justify herself for having married Andrew Kirkwood in the first instance—possibly both accounts were equally true. He was too much occupied just then by the practical aspects of the problem.

'It'll be awful for us,' he said.

'Will it? Why should it be?' she asked. She had had some glimmering of this complication, but had resolutely put it away from her.

'Oh! well, all the talk and everything,' he explained.

'Of course they'll talk, but they do now,' she commented. 'Will it be so very much worse afterwards?'

'Bound to be, isn't it?' he replied.

'Couldn't you bear it, for my sake?' she asked.

He shuddered. 'Oh, mother, must you?' he said.

They were near the equality she had sometimes

desired, but now she was afraid of it. On this level she could find no justification for rebellion. He was asking her for self-sacrifice, and she dared not meet that demand frankly. If this desire of hers was to be judged ethically, she would, she knew, have no case.

'I must, I must, Stephen,' she replied, rising again to her pedestal. 'I have given more than twenty years of sacrifice; now it's your turn. Be just to me, at least. Aren't you willing to give anything? I don't say anything about the others. They must take their chance. But *you*—won't you try to forgive me and go on loving me? After all these ages of darkness, won't you let me have a little light and happiness before I'm an old woman? We shan't be separated altogether, little boy. You can come to stay with us in London. That's why I wanted you to be an author. I thought you would come to live near us then. Couldn't you? Even now?'

'No, I couldn't do that,' he said. 'It's no use my trying to write, because I haven't got it in me. And—I don't think I want to see Dr Threlfall again, ever.'

'But, Stephen, you don't know him,' she protested.

Stephen looked obstinate. 'I don't want to, either,' he said.

'Oh! you're a Kirkwood, I suppose, after all,' she flared out suddenly. 'I thought you'd understand, but evidently you can't. You're just as selfish as the others. You can only think of what effect it will have upon you. You won't think of me, any of you. Just as long as I make love to you, you'll be adoring and all the rest of it—proud of me, aren't you, in a way? But when I really want your sympathy . . .' Her voice broke in a wave of self-compassion.

She was getting up, when Stephen threw himself at her feet and held her. 'It isn't that, mother, it isn't that,' he gasped. 'But I hate him for taking you away. I do, I hate him.'

And with that burst of expression, the tears he had been dreading so long, came with a rush, and he was no longer ashamed of them.

'Don't go away yet, mother,' he besought her. 'Not yet, not for a month or two. Promise me that.'

She held him close to her and promised. She was so moved by his outburst that just then she was willing to admit herself defeated; almost ready to promise him that she would not go at all.

7

Stephen was almost asleep when a memory recurred to him. For more than six hours he had forgotten the smile with which little Margaret Weatherley had so surprisingly honoured him that day. Now, the thought of it came back to him as a new hope in this drowning world of his. No doubt she had meant nothing by her childish encouragement; she was hopelessly far above him in the social scale; but her approval had been very sweet, and vaguely he was aware of it as promising some kind of exchange.

Stephen had this at least of his mother in him; he instinctively turned towards the light.

Chapter Two

I

STEPHEN found that life was taking a new shape—or was it a new colour?—when he woke the next morning. It was a Saturday, and the King's School was playing the Town that day, one of the most important cricket matches of the term. Stephen would be out of school by eleven o'clock, the morning was brilliantly fine, and he ought, by all precedents, to have awakened with a keen sense of anticipation and enjoyment. But his first conscious sensation when he came out of sleep was one of spiritual discomfort. He was aware of a feeling of gloom and depression. Just so might a man feel who learns in the prime of life that he is suffering from an incurable disease. It was as if he saw all the brightness of the day through blue glasses.

Yet, before he reached school, he had begun to hope again. His young optimism refused to accept as unalterable the verdict that had been passed on his happiness. He was not ready to find alleviations in the prospect of the life he anticipated if his mother persisted in the dreadful intention she had confessed to him; but he found comfort in the assurance that she would certainly change her mind. The more he thought of it, the more convinced he was that she could never run away with 'that fellow, Threlfall.' In the sunshine of the Park Road the idea became inconceivable.

She had not come in to breakfast. Stephen had been glad. He had been afraid that, in her presence, he

would be unequal to meeting the stolid inquiry of Emily's stare. As it was, his sister had appeared to suspect him of some complicity, but he believed that he had effectively hidden himself behind a screen of rudeness and bad temper. He had returned her stare with the challenging boyish impudence that Emily used to reprove as 'cheek.' On this occasion she had shown signs of embarrassment, and had looked away as if she had been caught spying.

They had all been uneasy during the meal; and, to Stephen, his father and his two sisters had seemed to stand out more clearly than usual from the vague, assimilating background of the familiar home-life. He had been more aware of them as personalities, as individuals. It was as if he had never before been conscious of their complete separateness from each other and from himself.

After breakfast, he had come straight out of the house without seeing his mother. Usually when she did not come in to breakfast he went to her room to say 'good-bye' before he went off to school. He was sorry now that he had omitted that ceremony. He saw that she would probably believe that he was angry with her. But, at the time, he had not thought of that. The truth was that he had been afraid to go to her. He had known that his sisters would regard his omission to say good-bye to his mother as having some special significance, but he had felt too shy to face her. He had been to her room hundreds of times on a similar errand, but this morning the prospect of that visit had had the air of being a new occasion. Since that talk of the night before she seemed to be in some way less his mother, less his father's wife. She, too, was newly separated from some generalised background of experience. She had always been different from the others. He had seen her as the important individual of the household. But

this morning he saw her as a stranger. He was perplexed about her. He had to confess that he had never understood her—either her secret life or her relations to himself, his father, and his sisters. It was such an amazing thought that she might be in love! He had no test for that in her case. He had assumed that love, of that kind, was the prerogative of the young. He thought of little Margaret Weatherley and blushed. The comparison seemed to him sacrilegious, indecent, an insult both to the child and to the mature woman.

2

He saw young Hall in the playground, but no sign of greeting passed between them. Hall was entertaining a group of younger boys, talking to them in a high, excited voice, posturing, trying to make them laugh. Stephen pretended not to see him. There was something subtly repellent to him in the sight of this striving to win popularity by playing the mountebank for the benefit of the juniors. Young Hall was always doing it. His elder brother did it, too, but in a more furtive way. He had favourites. You sometimes saw him walking down Park Road with his arm on a little boy's shoulder.

Stephen frowned. He was seeing the world again through his blue glasses. The very sunlight had lost its power of illumination.

But in the lobby the cloud lifted again. He was hailed by Noakes, the captain of the XI.—a stupid, honest, bullet-headed boy, but very good at games. Noakes was a boarder, the son of a parson, and, according to the accepted social standards of the school, a being recognisably superior to the ordinary day-boy. Stephen was conscious of being flattered when Noakes hailed him.

‘Hallo! Kirkwood. You’re the man I wanted to see,’

he said. 'I hope you'll be on your day, this afternoon. I'm going to put you in third wicket. The Town are shoving up an awfully hot lot against us. E. P. Dennis is playing for 'em.'

Stephen whistled. 'E. P. Dennis!' he exclaimed. 'Why, he's almost a pro. Plays for the County.'

Noakes nodded dolefully. 'And our bowling's so absolutely putrid,' he commented. 'Our only chance is to win the toss and make a decent score. Dennis is safe for a century if he once gets set.'

'I'll do my best, of course,' remarked Stephen, reverting to Noakes's opening.

'You're so confoundedly unreliable,' Noakes complained. 'If only you could come off to-day . . .'

'I'll admit I don't feel much like it,' Stephen said.

'Why not?' Noakes asked with an anxious scowl. 'Nervous?'

'No—no—not in that way,' Stephen explained. 'I feel a bit blue all round this morning—I don't know why.'

'Good Lord! You don't think you're going to have the measles, do you?' Noakes said. 'There's no end of it about. They're not sure the Weatherley kids haven't got it. The Head told me this morning that he was sending them all into the country at once. Might have to shut up the school, you know, if they have. You haven't got any spots, or cold shivers, or that sort of thing, have you?'

Stephen laughed. He was glad to be able to laugh in order to relieve his embarrassment. He was not much concerned by the possibility that little Margaret Weatherley might be sickening for the measles, nor that she had probably been sent away with the other 'kids' to the country; but he found that any reference to her, now, made him abominably self-conscious.

'Oh! no, nothing of that sort,' he said.

'What sort, then?' persisted the anxious Noakes.

'Oh, home trouble—of a kind,' Stephen said. The admission came automatically, and his hasty qualification failed to disguise it. 'I mean . . .' he began, hesitating to find some explanation of his, as he supposed inexplicable confession.

But Noakes did not wait for the explanation. 'Oh! I see,' he said, with a queer look at Stephen, that seemed to combine sympathy and contempt. 'Bad luck,' he added as he turned away.

Stephen gazed after him with a stare of dismay. Surely it was not possible that Noakes could know anything about that? Did the whole town know?

The bell was ringing for roll-call and prayers in the big Hall, and the gushing, uneven current of boys began to set strongly up the long corridor. If Noakes, who was a boarder, had had news of the scandal, by some side wind, argued Stephen, the day-boys might be posted to the latest detail, such as yesterday's desecration of the Cathedral. He watched uneasily as the younger boys clattered past him. He was ready to misinterpret every laugh or grimace, every glance thrown at him as evidence that the truth was out and being discussed on every hand. And when at the top of the big Hall, right under the head master's rostrum, he saw Mallows and Hall primus sniggering together, and looking pointedly in his direction, he had no longer any doubt.

3

The incident of the second hour before the 'break' that to-day would mark the end of school for the members of the First XI., was, however unpleasant in itself, something of a relief to Stephen.

Dr Weatherley was taking the Upper and Lower

Sixths together. The class was in Latin, a prepared translation of Horace. As a rule this was as strenuous an hour as any in the week. Weatherley, although he had no gift for teaching, was an enthusiastic scholar and a conscientious master. But this morning he was obviously worried by matters outside the subject immediately before him. He passed several howlers that sent up the eyebrows of the Upper Sixth, dropped viciously on young Winter for an uninspired but literally accurate piece of construing; and then on a slightly peevish note announced that the Lower Sixth as a whole had come disgracefully unprepared.

'Look through the passage again,' he added, in a more conciliatory voice. 'I shall be back in five minutes.'

Every boy there knew that he had made an excuse to return for a few minutes to the affairs that were absorbing his attention to the neglect of the class, but Weatherley, on some principle of his own, never admitted the boys into his confidence. He may have imagined that this reserve maintained the influence of his prestige.

He had hardly closed the door behind him before the class was discussing, with the dignity proper to its average age, the chances of an outbreak of measles. Stephen, still absorbed by his private grievance, ostensibly devoted himself to the reconsideration of the Odes of Horace, but his ears were pricked to catch any allusion to his mother's defiance of the town's opinion, and when Mallows stepped out from his desk, crossed the room, and renewed his confabulation with Hall I., he had no doubt that himself or his family was the subject of the conversation.

He could not longer keep up his assumption of indifference. He raised his head and stared defiantly at the two elder boys; a stare that they answered by a coarse laugh.

Mallows had given Hall I. a sheet of paper, and the

two of them were bending over it. From where he sat, Stephen could see that the subject of their amusement was a drawing of some kind. And the face of young Winter, who sat next above Hall I. at the bottom of the Lower Sixth, was burning with embarrassment.

Stephen's instinctive leap to his feet was made in defence of his mother. He was prepared to run amuck if need be to proclaim his championship. What momentarily defeated him was the fact that Hall instantly pocketed the drawing with a sneer of contempt.

'Give me that paper,' Stephen demanded.

Hall and Mallows jeered at him in concert.

'Damn you, give it to me,' Stephen insisted.

'Naughty language,' commented Mallows.

Hall leaned slightly back from his desk and tauntingly dared him to take the paper if he could. Hall was certainly two stone heavier than Stephen and eighteen months older. Also, he had Mallows to help him if physical violence were offered.

Stephen trembled with impotence.

'I'm going to have it,' he said passionately, and might have dared the attempt if Noakes had not interposed.

'Here, good Lord, what's the row?' he asked, coming over to the group at the bottom of the form.

'They've got some filthy drawing or other—about—about—me,' Stephen exclaimed.

Mallows raised his eyebrows. 'Really not,' he said calmly. 'Absolutely no concern whatever of Kirkwood's, Noakes. Just a private joke between Hall and myself.'

Noakes was not a clever boy, but he was as stubborn as a mule, and he strongly disapproved of the friendship between Mallows and Hall I. He thought Stephen rather a decent kid—for a day-boy.

'Well, let me see the thing,' he demanded of Hall.

'Oh! hang it all, Noakes,' Mallows interposed.

'I'm not talking to you,' Noakes replied to his fellow prefect. 'I'm talking to Hall.'

'My drawing, though,' Mallows said.

Noakes chose to ignore that. 'Hand it over, Hall,' he said, on a note of authority. 'I'm not going to have this sort of muck in the school.'

Hall looked sullen but uneasy. 'What if I don't?' he asked.

'I shall report it,' Noakes said.

'Oh! damn it all, you couldn't,' Mallows protested.

'Directly Dr Weatherley comes back,' Noakes said quietly. 'I'm going to put a stop to this kind of thing. It's been going on too long.'

Mallows shrugged his shoulders. 'Of course if Noakes is going to play a dirty game like that,' he said, addressing Hall.

Noakes held out his hand for the paper. He had no gift either for argument or repartee, but he had a reputation for keeping his word that in the present circumstances was more effective.

Hall took the paper from his pocket, hesitated as if he were about to tear it up, and then sheepishly gave it to Noakes with the remark, 'Absolutely nothing in it, really.'

Stephen caught one glimpse of the drawing before it was transferred to Noakes's pocket. It was not what he had dreaded. The figures represented were recognisable even without the initials that proclaimed their identity as those of himself and little Margaret Weatherley. Mallows was a clever draughtsman.

'What are you going to do with it?' Mallows asked with a manifest anxiety.

'Burn it as soon as I get the chance,' Noakes said, and added in a tone of disgust for the benefit of the two classes at large. 'What a couple of filthy swine you are.'

He stalked back to his desk, the picture of righteous anger.

There could be no question that his was the popular party. Medboro' was a clean enough school as schools go, and both Mallows and Hall I. had long been stigmatised as 'dirty devils.'

Stephen, returning to his place, was trying to catch the eye of the perjured Hall secundus who, alone, could have been responsible for the information that had inspired the subject of Mallow's obscenity. But young Hall was pretending a complete absorption in the Odes of Horace; and Stephen had hardly sat down again before Dr Weatherley returned, evidently in a great hurry, with his gown bellying behind him, and wearing that look of grave abstraction which in the eyes of the school made him appear almost incredibly adult.

Fortunately for Stephen, he was not called to 'go on' before the clangour of the bell, rung five minutes earlier than usual, announced for him the end of his week's work. He could not fix his attention on Horace. The incident of the drawing had temporarily closed the two ends of the ring that had begun to encircle him when little Margaret Weatherley had so unexpectedly put him in a class apart from all the other boys. That smile of hers, the dread of a scandal about his mother, his sight of her the night before, as a young and ardent woman in the thrall of an illicit passion, and now this final branding of himself as a lover—all these influences combined to hedge him into a limited world in which he moved, alone, but conspicuous. He had a sense of wrong-doing, of being ashamed, of somehow ranking with such boys as Hall I. and Mallows, whom he had always disliked. And he saw no way of escape. He would certainly 'have it out' with young Hall for his despicable breach of faith; but even if he could be induced to fight, the incident would confirm, rather than

otherwise, the impression that there was some ground for—well, for the implications of that beastly drawing of Mallow's. Moreover, if that ridiculous scandal could be exposed for the canard that it was, a far greater and more valid threat still hung over him. His mother had said she would come up to the Town ground to watch the match after lunch, and some of the boys would be talking about her and pointing her out as 'young Kirkwood's mother.' He must, however innocently, be associated with her coming disgrace; and fellows like Hall primus would have the chance to say that Stephen was precociously following in her footsteps; that at seventeen he was making love to the head master's daughter. It wasn't true. In fact, Stephen was perfectly innocent. Yet he felt guilty. Little Margaret's smile had flattered him, and he would have been glad to be sure that it was the expression of a particular preference for him as a man. He had made up his mind that should he meet her in the town and should she smile at him again, he would—if he dared—return her salutation with a significance that she could not misunderstand. He liked to picture that meeting, and to endow the thought of it with the glamour of true romance. He would like her to know that her favour had been gratefully accepted, that he was her true and devoted slave.

As to the other affair, which seemed to him by comparison sordid and in some way slightly indecent (his mother and Dr Threlfall were so hopelessly old) he was, unfortunately, inextricably involved. If a slur were cast on his family's reputation, he could not hope to escape the taint of it. He hoped desperately that if his mother did come to the match she would not bring Dr Threlfall with her.

It was his preoccupation with this last threat to his reputation that permitted Hall II. to escape when the bell rang for the interval. At that moment Stephen had

forgotten the necessity for having an immediate interview with the mischief-maker, and Hall took full advantage of the opportunity afforded him. When Stephen remembered him, he was nowhere to be seen; and later, on the way up to the Town ground, Stephen saw his enemy walking arm-in-arm with his brother and Mallows, well protected against any hostile approach. The combination was already marked as being definitely inimical to him. It represented a party that might find many new adherents in both the upper and the lower schools. And just then, Stephen forgot that his own party would probably be the larger of the two, and certainly of a better standing; he thought of himself as alone and conspicuous, as an object of shame exposed in the public stocks.

3

His experience of the first three-quarters of the match was not of a kind likely to raise his spirits. The Town won the toss and took first innings; lost one wicket for seven, and then proceeded to make 389 in less than four hours. The redoubtable E. P. Dennis was chiefly responsible for this score, and once he had got the measure of the school bowling he gave the field a strenuous and fatiguing outing. Stephen, at long-off and deep square-leg—except for three disastrous overs in which he was tried as a bowler—was very thankful when the innings closed.

In the last hour and a half he had almost forgotten his spiritual troubles. Dennis was a powerful hitter, and Stephen had been kept very actively employed in his efforts to save boundaries. But as he trotted rather wearily across the length of the field towards the pavilion, he was hailed out of the comparative ease of his physical

tiredness by the sight of his mother, coming to meet him, in company with Dr Threlfall.

Even if she had not gaily beckoned to him with her sunshade, Stephen could not have avoided them without unmistakable rudeness, but he slackened his pace and his approach to them displayed quite clearly the marks of his reluctance.

His mother chose to overlook that evidence.

'Poor Stephen,' she said, as soon as he was well within hearing distance. 'You must be tired out. How we've been hating that horrible Dennis person. Haven't you even got the energy left to say "How do you do" to Dr Threlfall?'

Stephen held out a limp, hot hand, feebly mumbling some inaudible acknowledgment of his assumed pleasure at the meeting.

He was resentful. He had guessed at once that his mother had planned this. She had said last night that she wanted him to meet Dr Threlfall. She was trying to persuade him into complicity with her. She was suffering from the delusion that any one who met Dr Threlfall was sure to like him. And all Stephen's desires at that moment were concentrated on the task of showing her that she was mistaken. He had not yet looked at the organist himself. He was of no account save as a means of communication between Stephen and his mother. She, for practical purposes, was his only audience.

And, to her, his intention was evidently sufficiently obvious. 'Surely, dear boy, you're not so tired that you can't hold your head up?' she remarked sharply. 'I am rather done,' Stephen muttered. 'It's been so beastly hot.'

The sound of Threlfall's voice came with an effect of pleasant coolness. 'When do you go in?' he asked. 'Shall you have time for a rest?'

'Third wicket,' Stephen mumbled.

He was suddenly ashamed of his gaucheness and his manner of speaking. Threlfall's voice had that tone and finish associated in Stephen's mind with a kind of rare aristocracy. The Bishop spoke like that, and his wife, Lady Constance. There was something more in it than their pronunciation. You knew at once that that way of speaking was natural to them, that it was free from all effort or imitation.

'Well, we'll hope that you won't have to go in for a long time yet,' Threlfall continued gently.

Stephen looked up. He had seen the organist before at a distance, hurrying up the aisle of the Cathedral in his gown, or crossing the cloisters, but never until to-day at such close quarters as this. And the effect of him accorded, almost startlingly, with the sound of his cultured, musical voice. There was about him a complete air of gentleness. His good looks were only saved from femininity by the dominating stamp of their intellectuality. His steady eyes, his forehead, the shape of his head, and the clean curves of his mouth and chin all proclaimed him an intellectual. But behind these more obvious evidences was something that produced a dominating impression of softness, of tenderness and of grace.

And Stephen succumbed, with one last flash of impatience, to a fascination that was, so far as he was concerned, irresistible. He was impressed, and almost too ready, perhaps, to offer instinctive homage to one whom he recognised as a social and intellectual superior. He saw Threlfall for an instant as Cecilia Kirkwood saw him, and there came to him a passing vision of his own father as hopelessly degraded by the impression. How could the little bookseller, with his untidy beard, his common speech, his absurd little affectations of scholarship, hope to compete in love, with this charming aristocrat?

Later, Stephen was in his own thoughts inclined vehemently to defend his father; but just then he was able to realise his mother's weakness. He saw with her eyes and appreciated her inability to resist. Indeed, it seemed to him that, wonderful as he had always thought her to be, she was honoured by this man's devotion.

'I hope I shan't,' Stephen said in reply to Threlfall's comment, 'but I'm afraid we don't stand much of a chance.' He looked up frankly now, smiling a little shyly.

'Because you've had such a gruelling in the field?' Threlfall asked sympathetically.

'Partly,' Stephen admitted. 'But really they're too good for us all round.'

'Oh! well, of course, if you're going in to bat in that spirit . . . ' his mother said.

'It's quite extraordinary how an eleven can be affected in that way,' Threlfall replied, as they all three walked slowly back towards the pavilion. 'The phrase about a "rot setting in" is founded on jolly good psychology. It's absolutely true, isn't it,' he went on, turning to Stephen, 'that when a team gets its tail down, it goes all to pieces?'

'Oh! rather,' Stephen agreed, flattered at this reference to him as to an expert.

'I have to get back now,' Threlfall said as they reached the pavilion. 'I left the service to Walker for once, but I've got an appointment with the Dean at four o'clock. Jolly to have met you, Stephen. I hope that we shall see a lot more of one another later on.'

Stephen, still under the influence of the organist's fascination responded with a shy enthusiasm.

'Oh! thanks,' he said awkwardly.

Not until the graceful figure of Dr Threlfall had turned the corner of the pavilion, did Stephen awake to a consciousness of the fact that he and his mother were

standing alone in the focus of attention. It seemed to him that they were suddenly displayed as a single object for the censure of the crowd, and that at any moment a drastic judgment might descend upon and wither them. He had not the courage to raise his eyes. It was a shock to him when he heard his mother's voice saying clearly and confidently, as if she and he were safely in the seclusion of the house:—

‘Now own up, Stephen. Admit that you were wrong about him.’

He frowned nervously. ‘Oh! I say, mother, let's get out of this,’ he said.

Cecilia smiled, and twirled her parasol with a gesture that had an effect of careless defiance. ‘My dear little boy,’ she remonstrated, ‘it's no use running away. I know that they're all staring at us and trying to hear what we say. Does it matter? We've nothing to be ashamed of; and I'm quite used to being stared at. Courage, Stephen, courage. They'll pelt us directly we turn our backs on them.’

He was too uncomfortable to get the flavour of that image. ‘We must go some time,’ he grumbled. ‘And anyway I shouldn't be sorry to sit down.’

‘Oh! dear, how feeble you are this afternoon,’ she exclaimed impatiently. ‘Well, let's go and sit somewhere. I want to talk to you about—last night, about everything. Now you've seen him, it makes all the difference.’

‘Oh, mother, not now; not here,’ he protested.

He resented both her frankness and her selfishness. He felt vaguely that she ought to be ashamed of her obsession. Why couldn't she realise that her submission to the organist's fascination was something to be fought against and subdued? He admitted the fascination now, and saw the whole problem in a new light; but even in its new aspect it only appeared as a more subtle snare.

Nothing could make it *right*. Moreover, a further complication was puzzling him. His mother must be older than Dr Threlfall. She was, he knew, forty-one; and until this near sight of him he had supposed without inquiry that the organist was at least as old. He had heard people say when Threlfall was appointed a few months before that he was very young to hold that position; but, for all Stephen knew, fifty might have been young for a cathedral organist.

'How tiresome you are,' his mother said. 'Do, for goodness' sake, go and lie down somewhere until it's your turn to go in.'

Stephen looked down at her apologetically; her temper always slightly intimidated him.

'But, mother, surely you can't want me to talk about *that*; now?' he expostulated.

'Not if you don't want to,' she returned petulantly. 'And, in any case, here's that awful aunt of yours coming to save the rags of my reputation if she can.'

Mrs Bell was, indeed, bearing down upon them with a lingering directness that expressed a kind of steady intention without impulse. She came, not because she wished to, but because she felt that she 'simply must,' as she would have put it. She could no longer bear to see her brother's wife posed in the public eye and flaunting her light-minded courage. People were talking about her, almost openly, as an abandoned woman; and an unbearable reflection of the scandal was falling upon Mrs Bell herself. Personally, she did not believe that her sister-in-law 'meant anything.' She was just a victim of her deplorable vanity. She enjoyed, incredible as it seemed, to be talked about, even though the talk were malicious.

'My dear Cicely,' she said, a trifle breathlessly, as she came up. 'Is it wise to stand about in this sun like that? Why not come in the shade?'

She had not had the least intention of using a metaphor and was shocked by her sister-in-law's laugh.

'My dear Eleanor,' Cecilia replied, with a frank imitation of Mrs Bell's manner. 'I happen to enjoy the sun.' And again she gave that vigorous twirl to her sunshade, which bespoke her defiance of all Medboro' opinion.

Mrs Bell simpered. 'I can't think it's wise,' she suggested, with an air of apologetic, yet steadfastly determined reproof.

'I'm not wise, Eleanor,' Cecilia said. 'And, in any case, I'm going home. There's nothing to stop for now.'

Even Stephen, still waiting reluctantly, winced at that rather brutal statement. Mrs Bell literally quivered. 'Really, Cicely,' she said, 'I can't imagine what you mean. Shan't you stay to see Stephen out?'

'Oh! Stephen hasn't pleased me this afternoon,' his mother said, looking round at him with an expression of contempt. 'And I feel absolutely certain that he'll be out first ball. He's so tired already, that he's hardly got the energy to stand up. If he weren't so horribly afraid of being stared at, he'd probably drop down on the grass at our feet this minute.'

'Mother!' Stephen protested feebly.

She made a little gesture of disdain. She was so able to display her mood; and her son was so well versed in reading the varying shades of her expression. And a sign such as she had now given him was sufficient to plunge him into despair. They had often had these lovers' quarrels in recent years, and he knew that for this afternoon at least he was 'out' with her.

He had always hated that sense of being 'out' with her; but to-day as he accepted his dismissal and drifted off to a comparatively quiet corner where he could throw himself down and reflect at his leisure, he was aware of a feeling of abandonment that was new to him. He was

facing for the first time the full realisation that she might, almost any day, be finally lost to him—if, indeed, she were not lost already. And, after his recent emotions, he was not perfectly sure whether the loss of her might not, after all, carry certain compensating advantages. He had a feeling of release, as if some almost unbearable strain upon his loyalty had been mercifully relaxed. If she no longer loved him; if she had ceded everything that she had to that man of all the gifts whom Stephen in his present mood longed and yet failed to dislike; he was in some sense relieved from the responsibility of dissuading her. The thought gave him ease in the midst of his pain. He had been a slave, finding his greatest joy in submission, but now, despite the misery of his ache, he might be free. He was a trifle uncertain of his glories, as yet; he trembled a little at the vastness of the new places in which he found himself free to wander; but he was distinctly aware of great possibilities in his thought of that freedom.

His mind presented a picture of little Margaret Weatherley, turning with a dainty whisk of short skirts and long hair to single him out with the enchanted smile of her favour.

A groan from a small knot of lower school boys close at hand turned his attention back to the match.

Graham was out; and his spread-eagled wicket advertised the cause of his dismissal. The telegraph was being hoisted. 17—1—11. Noakes, the captain, was in at the other end, playing his usual careful game with even more than his customary caution. Mallows was the next man, a hitter. He might knock the professional off his length. It was invariably the Town pro. who took the majority of the wickets. And then Mallows spooned his second ball into the hands of mid-off—an absolute sitter!

Stephen got up and went back to the pavilion to put

on his pads. By the entrance he met Hall I. coming out. They did not speak to one another—Hall was just going in to bat—but the confrontation recalled Stephen to the thought of his second problem.

But, strangely enough, it came back to him in a new guise. He no longer looked upon the ragging he anticipated from Malloys and Hall as likely to cast some sort of slur upon him. It was true that the innuendo of that drawing was a thing of disgust, if it were only in the cause of little Margaret Weatherley's reputation, he must resolutely suppress—he would have all the decent-minded fellows in the Sixth on his side—any attempt to sully the affair by such hideous suggestion as that of the morning. He would begin his campaign by fighting Hall II. But all the feeling of disgrace, that had been so present with him a few hours ago, had gone. He could not understand why he should ever have thought that there was anything shameful in the accusation of being in love with the head master's daughter.

As he fastened the buckles of his pads he looked boldly round from his elevation on a back seat of the pavilion to see if little Miss Weatherley herself had come to watch the match. He hoped, quite desperately, that she had, and that a chance might be given him to do something heroic in her sight—save the school from a bad licking, for instance. But there was no sign of any of the head master's party, nor even of Dr Weatherley himself. Perhaps that rumour concerning the outbreak of measles had had good foundation.

Hall I. did not look likely to stay long, and Stephen tried to collect his thoughts and concentrate them on the determination to save the school from defeat. He had made forty-one not out in the match against Whittlesea on the school ground a month ago, and if he could but recover the sense of mastery that had come to him on

that occasion, he might make a century to-day. He had never made a century and it would be a magnificent achievement to make one now when runs were so badly wanted. Confidence was the thing. If he could go in feeling sure of himself he would be all right. But then his thoughts flew off again to the question of how he was going to get young Hall up to the scratch of an actual fight in the gymnasium. It was queer how little interest cricket had for him that afternoon.

And even after Hall I. had been well caught in the long field from a wild swipe that had sent the ball soaring to a tremendous height, Stephen could not concentrate his attention on the important task before him. As he went out to join the patient Noakes at the wickets he was still pondering the difficulties of stimulating the courage of Hall II.

'For goodness' sake play carefully,' Noakes murmured as Stephen passed him.

Stephen nodded. He would do his best of course; but just then cricket really didn't seem to matter.

It seemed to matter less and less as the overs passed; though he grew more interested in demonstrating to himself how absurdly easy it was to play the Town's bowling. Something inside him responded automatically to the threat or promise of each delivery. He did not know why he played forward to one good length ball and back to another, or why he knew instantly which balls it was safe to hit; the fact was obvious, and it was quite an amusing game to realise his own competence. Nothing else interested him for the time being. He did not know how many he had scored; the encouraging shouts of the school appeared to have nothing to do with his own play; the one truly fascinating phenomenon was that the ball looked as big as a cabbage, and that it was practically impossible to miss it. It was certainly a dreadful bore watching his patient captain refusing

splendid chances to score; but on the other hand it was good fun to show him how to take them when his own turn came.

'Steady, old chap, you're playing frightfully well. Don't get reckless,' Noakes urged him once between the overs.

'All right,' Stephen had replied, and for a few moments he had tried once more to concentrate on the determination to make a hundred; but before his turn to play had come again, he had forgotten his intention. The truth was that for some reason he had not time to examine, he did not care whether he got out or not.

Meanwhile, the bowling was unquestionably getting looser. When the 'pro.' came on again for the third time he was pitching them short and giving Stephen just the opportunities he wanted to pull them round to leg. He had always been strongest on the leg side. He was a well built boy, but he had not the power as yet to make long drives on the off. . . .

He was immensely astonished when, instead of crossing at the end of the over, the players began to move off the field. He had heard the pavilion clock strike a few seconds before, but it seemed to have been striking every ten minutes since he had been in. He was still more surprised when he found himself the centre of a wildly enthusiastic crowd, and felt himself being lifted shoulder high and carried back to the pavilion.

And then his intense preoccupation with something altogether disconnected with cricket suddenly broke. He leaned down and spoke to Graham who was carrying his right leg.

'I say, Graham,' he asked, with a great burst of excitement. 'How many have I made?'

'A hundred and thirty-six,' Graham told him.

4

Some guardian angel gifted with a nice sense of earthly values and the power of interference with worldly affairs seemed to have been guiding Stephen's destiny that afternoon; for that 'century' of his was unquestionably a very powerful influence in the determination of his immediate affairs. However modestly he had tried to conceal his elation while he was still on the field, he was very conscious of his recent promotion to the rank of hero as he slammed into the shop in Long Causeway at seven o'clock. Noakes had slapped him on the back with a magnificent heartiness in the enthusiasm of the moment, and had eulogised his performance as 'a thundering good innings.' Stephen had good cause for satisfaction all round.

His father looked up with a nervous jerk as his son came in, then catching some reflection of the triumph that shone in Stephen's face, asked, 'Did you win?'

'No, we drew,' Stephen said, doing his best not to appear too vainglorious, and added as quietly as he could, 'I say, father, I made a hundred and thirty-six not out.'

Mr Kirkwood beamed and began to rub his hands together, a trick of his that Cecilia had never been able to cure. 'A hundred and thirty-six not out,' he repeated on a note of flattering astonishment. 'I say! I say! Stephen; that's something like.'

'Yes, and there's more in it than that, father,' Stephen went on, forgetting his modesty in this atmosphere of safe admiration. 'I mean, the Town went in first and made 389, Dennis was playing for them you know—he made 108—and when we went in we lost three wickets for twenty-seven. Then I went in with Noakes and we played out time together. We should

have licked 'em if we'd had more time. Noakes only made 81 not out. He's awfully slow, you know.'

Mr Kirkwood produced a handkerchief and wiped his eyes. 'Let's go and tell mother,' he said. 'She's upstairs. She came in to tea and hasn't been out again since.'

'Noakes and I stopped the rot, you see,' Stephen explained, as he and his father went upstairs, both of them brimming with boyish excitement.

'I see, I see,' Mr Kirkwood agreed eagerly. 'You made the runs just in the nick of time, eh? They'll think a lot of you up at the school after this.'

'Noakes was frightfully pleased,' Stephen admitted.

They broke into the sitting-room together, so hot with pride and enthusiasm that Cecilia and the two girls started up with an exclamation of something that sounded like dismay.

'It's all right, all right,' Mr Kirkwood stammered reassuringly, while Stephen stood a little behind him, ready to prompt his willing trumpeter should he fail to emphasise the great dramatic value of the perfect innings. 'Here's Stephen been doing great things, mother—oh! very great things—saved the school in the nick of time and made 136 not out.'

'Oh! Stephen!' gasped Emily and Hilda, rising at once to the proper note of applause. 'Did you really? Do tell us all about it,' they continued antiphonally.

In their acclamation of the family achievement, Mr Kirkwood and his two daughters seemed to have temporarily forsaken the worship of their usual idol, and to have set up a new image in her place. The bookseller, flushing with pleasure at this new response to his son's exploit, had turned his back on his wife, and was staring at his son, rubbing his hands together and beaming upon him with a simple, boyish glee. Cecilia must not be judged too harshly on this occasion, for

displaying what appeared to be nothing more than a childish jealousy.

The truth is that she alone was able to appreciate the spirit that underlay this slightly hysterical ovation of Stephen. She had failed them. In the past few weeks she had strained their loyalty. The admiration she had been able to evoke without effort was being tendered more and more grudgingly. The worship that had been a spontaneous expression of emotion was degenerating into a dogma. And she realised the significance of their instinctive willingness to turn their regard towards a new object of admiration. She had worried and tired them. It was a relief for them to forget her. If Stephen had performed his feat six weeks ago the tribute of it would have been flung at her feet. Now her husband and her two daughters grasped eagerly at an excuse for diverting their attention from her; and Stephen himself had become—she could read the signs of it in his face and attitude—self-sufficient. He was satisfied with the applause he had been, and was still, receiving. She was no longer essential to his happiness. After their quarrel of the afternoon, she had expected him to come back submissively asking her forgiveness. Instead of that he returned flushed with pride and almost forgetful of her existence.

Her temperament could not endure the slight to her vanity. Her vivid imagination pictured the probable development of the conversation throughout the evening; the elaborations of Stephen's performance, the endless repetitions and descriptions in which his innings would be played over and over again. She felt that she could not endure the awful futility of that prospect. She was aware of being suddenly mature, of having passed the summit of her powers and of falling into the pitiful condition of one who lives on her reputation.

She got up with a quick movement of determination

as if she would fly from the sight of her defeat, and walked over to the door.

But, at that, Stephen did at last make an effort to reach out to her. He had been conscious of his triumph over her. In his boyish way he had been glad to brag of his independence; glad to be able to come back after their quarrel of the afternoon and show her that she had not, after all, spoilt his day. But he could not let her go without a protest.

'Mother, aren't you going to say anything?' he asked, half in supplication, half in defiance.

She turned and looked at him. 'Oh! you don't want me any more,' she said.

Even then, the scales of their destiny had not irrecoverably dipped.

As she stood there by the door, looking back at her son, the alternatives were perfectly clear in her mind. She was not irretrievably committed. She was in love with Christopher Threlfall. He stood to her for all that was adorable in a man; for beauty, grace of mind, culture, ability. He was deeply in love with her. He had been trying his best to persuade her to go away with him—to London, where he promised her that they would be enthusiastically received by a large circle of his friends and acquaintances; musicians, artists, and writers; broad-minded men and women who would honour rather than despise them for their brave flouting of convention.

Yet the lure of that bewildering picture had not completely bemused her quick intelligence. In her most fascinated contemplation of it, she had been able to reckon her probable loss. She had not lived for twenty-five years in a provincial town without absorbing something of its opinions. Moreover, greatly as she affected to despise the audience she had won for herself in Medboro', she realised that it would be a loss to turn

all that deftly-won admiration into contempt. She was still aware of her success in Medboro'. It sometimes palled as being too similar in kind, but it supported her. And somehow, she ranked her husband and her two daughters in this category of general support. In one other class quite apart stood Stephen. If the other influences tipped, on the whole, the balance in favour of Christopher, love, and the larger society of musicians, artists, and writers in London; her love for her son might yet have turned the scale.

And as she watched him now, she definitely wavered. His merely physical attraction alone made her yearn towards him. He looked so clean and young and vigorous. His white flannels set off the delicate strength of his slender limbs and graceful body. The sunburn on his face emphasised the handsome lines of his features, the rather dark blue of the eyes that were so like her own. He was undoubtedly a nice-looking boy; and there was, even in this hour of his triumph, something wistful and pleading about his beauty that appealed to her womanhood.

It is almost certain that he might have won her even at that eleventh hour, had he realised the climax and responded as she would have had him respond. But he was too elated for humility just then; and her apparent indifference to his success had wounded him. Moreover, she had put into words his thought of the afternoon. 'You don't want me any more,' she had said, and again a sense of freedom from some old restraint, a sense of enlargement and liberty flashed through his mind.

His reply was merely petulant. He shrugged his shoulders and turned away from her, with the same boyish rudeness of gesture with which he might have snubbed one of his sisters. But with that gesture, he made a decision that was to alter the course of all their lives.

Cecilia turned quickly away and left the room, shutting the door after her.

5

Emily turned the embarrassment of her steady gaze immovably upon her father.

'I don't know what's come to mother, lately,' she said.

Mr Kirkwood began to fidget with his sparse little beard. 'She's a little out of sorts, perhaps,' he hazarded feebly.

'Well, oughtn't we to *do* something, father?' Emily continued, still pinning him with her stare.

'Oh! what *can* you *do*?' put in Stephen irritably. Everything was spoilt now; and it was all his mother's fault. Why couldn't she behave sensibly? Surely she hadn't expected him to come straight home and beg her pardon, and ask her to talk to him about Threlfall—after that innings?

Emily turned herself about and focused her attention upon her brother. 'If she's out of sorts she ought to see a doctor,' she said.

'*That* wouldn't be any good,' Stephen returned without hesitation.

'Well, but why wouldn't it?' Emily inquired, with a meaning in her tone that could not be mistaken.

'No good asking me,' was Stephen's evasion.

'Well, I think it's time something was done,' Emily said, sharpening the point of her now obvious intention.

'I don't know what you mean, Emily,' little Kirkwood put in nervously.

Emily knew, they all three knew, that their father's remark had been intended as a reminder that any open discussion of a mother's failings was impossible between father and children; but Emily had made up her mind

that the time had come when they must, in her own phrase, 'face the facts.'

'I don't think it's *right* for us to let things go on, and not make any effort to stop them,' she said in a low, but determined voice. 'I don't see the good of our going on pretending, when we all know perfectly well what's happening. Do you, Hilda?'

'No, I don't,' Hilda emphatically agreed.

Stephen, sitting on the sofa disconsolately nursing his foot, was staring straight out in front of him with just such an expression as his mother had worn the evening before.

Mr Kirkwood began to fret. 'No, *no*, Emily—really I can't see the use of our discussing things that we—at least that *you* don't understand. It—it isn't—it can't do any good—our talking about them. Besides . . .'

He was valiantly doing his best to stop these disloyal confidences; yet he had a strong disinclination to take the obviously effective course of immediately leaving them with the excuse that he must go down to the shop. It would have been an immense relief to him to confide some of the tortured arguments that had perpetually haunted him during the last few weeks, and now that Emily had spoken out he found a kind of solace in playing with the temptation. But all the man he had made of himself, resolutely opposed the idea of making confidants of his, and her, children. Moreover, the one argument that rose up so overshadowingly at those times when he had found a dozen magnificent reasons to prove that Cecilia could never be finally unfaithful to him; was an argument that could not conceivably be repeated to any living person. Most certainly he could never in any circumstances ever hint to Emily, Hilda or Stephen that their mother had not, in a way, been his wife, now, for more than five weeks.

She had made no excuse for her evasions, and he had

asked her for none. He had done his best to pretend that he did not care.

'Besides . . . ' he was going on trying to show good cause for avoiding the subject, while still keeping the shadow of it just within sight; but Emily interrupted him.

'Sh ! Listen ! ' she said, adjuring him with an uplifted forefinger. 'There ! ' she added, as through the silence that followed they heard the sound of their mother's feet upon the stairs.

Hilda jumped up and went to the window.

'She's gone down the street—towards the Lincoln Road,' was her report, given a few seconds later.

Mr Kirkwood chose to overlook the implication conveyed by his daughter's mention of the road in which Dr Threlfall lodged.

'It's nearly eight o'clock,' he said, looking at his watch, 'I must go down and close the shop. We'd better not wait supper for her.'

His hesitations had been instantly resolved by this last evidence as he regarded it, of Cecilia's intention. As Emily had held up the podgy forefinger that was a feminine copy of his own, a dreadful certainty had come to him. It seemed to him now, that he had always known that this would happen. He felt suddenly tired and hopeless. He wanted to think of some plan by which a pitiful remnant of Cecilia's affection for him might yet be saved; or re-stimulated. If his imagination would have obeyed him, he would have devised pictures of romantic self-sacrifice to win her pity, if not her esteem. But his thoughts were not under his own control. Despite his emphatic asseverations that it was all over, his mind continued to run in the groove that had been worn so deeply in the course of the past five weeks. He could not stop the tedious procession of argument that still pleaded the cause of uncertainty,

although he continued to assure himself that he had no longer any doubt.

'... But at her age; after all these years; she'd think of the children if she didn't of me; for Stephen's sake, if it were only that; it isn't likely that he's in *love* with her; they've got their music to talk about; she has had her flirtations before, but it's never been serious; naturally she likes admiration; she'd never face the town; and he must be five years younger than she is—at the very least; why, at her age . . .'

He could not stay the endless repetition in which he had found his chief consolation. The mechanism of his imagination ran on with a kind of ironical serenity. He could, by a great effort, cover it over for a time by a fierce concentration on the assertion that he *knew* it was all over, but the moment his effort was relaxed, the same movement slid into action again.

Green, the assistant, staggering through the shop with a load of shutters, wondered why his master didn't get on with the tidying up. His employer had mercifully come down at ten minutes to eight and given the order to close the shop, and now he was wasting precious time fiddling about behind the counter. If he had been prompt, Green might have 'got off sharp for once.'

Later on, Green was to remember that night as the first occasion on which Mr Kirkwood was 'took funny'; and it became the subject of a composed reminiscence in the days when Green himself had become the master of those same premises. But that evening he was anxious to get away as soon as possible in order to keep an engagement with a certain Miss Paley, for whose society he had an especial predilection; and he displayed no kind of sympathy for his employer's queerness of manner. Nevertheless he did notice, and reported, partly by way of excuse, to Miss Paley afterwards, that old Kirkwood didn't seem able to make up his mind what to do next.

Couldn't set about clearing up—the report continued, 'I 'ad to do it all in the end, and then I 'ad no end of a job to get 'im to pay me my wages. All mazed like he was.'

'It's that wife of 'is is at the bottom of it, I lay,' replied Miss Paley.

Green couldn't say about that, but he'd seen her go out not two minutes before Mr Kirkwood came down, looking, he thought, much as usual.

Miss Paley tossed her head. She had noticed before that Green was inclined to defend the reputation of his employer's wife. 'Makes eyes at every man, I suppose,' was Miss Paley's inference. She ought to be ashamed of 'erself, at 'er age. Why, that great staring girl of 'ers, the teacher, was twenty if she was a day.

6

Stephen had inherited just so much of his mother's temperament as was sufficient to emphasise his enjoyments and despondencies without disqualifying him for the solid business of life. And on the evening of this day which was, although he did not realise it either at the time or in retrospect, the most critical day of his development, the effect of his inheritance was peculiarly noticeable. He had been greatly stirred, not only by his triumph in the cricket field and the subsequent adulations he had received, but also and perhaps in an even greater degree, by the sudden extinction of those high emotions. His sisters unconsciously completed the work that their mother had begun. Now that the subject which was to them of paramount importance had been plainly displayed and the truth of all their determinedly smothered suspicions practically admitted by their father and brother they came to the discussion of it with

the frank greediness of the half-starved. Stephen's feat of the afternoon was for the moment completely obliterated from their minds.

'Where do you suppose she's gone?' Hilda said, as soon as her father had left the room. She had an air at once scared and rapturous, as if she gloated over the danger of this immense and threatening development.

Emily pursed her mouth and profoundly contemplated the design of the tablecloth. 'Perhaps Stephen could tell us,' she remarked after a solemn interval.

'Why me?' he replied irritably.

'Do you mean you don't know?' Hilda asked.

'No more than you do. Why should I?' grumbled Stephen.

Emily brought her gaze to bear upon him with a menacing deliberation. 'Hasn't she told you anything herself?' she inquired.

'Oh! Lord, what is the good of talking about it?' Stephen protested, wriggling under the menace of his sister's concentrated attention.

'It seems to me that we ought to talk about it,' Emily persisted, threatening him, as it were, with open sights.

'What for? What good can we do?' Stephen said uncomfortably.

'You admit that we ought to do something,' Emily continued. 'You must admit that. And if you're sure there's something wrong, Hilda and I ought to know about it. We don't know what we ought to do until we are sure.'

'What could you *do* if you were?' posed Stephen, trying to avoid the direct issue.

'Speak to her,' Emily announced solemnly, and in the wonder of that announcement she temporarily released her brother, staring past him at the head of the sofa.

He jumped up with a quick movement of relief, as if

he had been gratefully unpinned. 'Well, I'm *not* sure,' he said, beginning to pace up and down the room. 'Not a bit sure. And even if I was, what earthly difference do you suppose it would make, you speaking to her? When she's set on anything, she doesn't care a hang what we say or what we think. You know that as well as I do.'

Emily had lost her advantage. She couldn't sight with any effect on a moving target, but she maintained her magnificent concentration on essentials.

'You do know she's set on this, then?' she said.

'No, I don't,' Stephen replied. 'How could I?'

'Well, you know there's *something* in it,' Emily urged.

'We *all* know that, more or less,' Stephen returned contemptuously.

'I do think you might at least be honest with us, Stee,' Hilda put in. She was getting a little tired of her sister's method of examination, and had decided to try the effect of a human appeal.

'Well, aren't I being?' Stephen remonstrated petulantly.

'That's what Emily and I don't know,' Hilda explained, on a note of conciliation. 'You see we aren't a bit sure if there's anything in it at all, really. I mean if it's just one of her usual flirtations. Because if it is, it doesn't matter much. But if it isn't, and you *know* it isn't, Emily and I think you ought to tell us, so that we can decide what ought to be done about it.'

Stephen paused in his walk, and then, feeling Emily's gaze getting back into action, hastily said, 'Oh! for the Lord's sake, Em, don't *stare* at me, or I'll go out of the room.'

'I didn't know I was,' Emily excused herself, and added, 'I don't seem able to help it.'

For a moment it seemed that Stephen had been saved by this diversion, but his sisters immediately swooped

back again with a fierceness that could not be denied.

'You see that, don't you, Stee,' Hilda pleaded.

'See what?' was Stephen's evasion.

'That if you're sure this is something more than a flirtation . . .'

'But how can I be sure,' he interrupted.

'Well, you are, aren't you?' put in Emily, point blank.

'Oh! Lord!' Stephen ejaculated, and he suddenly sat down on the sofa and hid his face in his hands.

'What did she say to you about it last night?' Hilda pursued him.

'Lots of things,' murmured Stephen, keeping his face hidden.

'Practically admitting that she was in love with Dr Threlfall?' asked Emily.

Stephen shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh! Em, isn't it awful?' Hilda broke out. 'What shall we do?'

'Does she mean to go off with him?' Emily continued, wallowing in horror.

'I've no idea,' Stephen said.

'Did you know she was going to see him to-night?' Hilda went on. They had got him down now; and meant to squeeze him dry.

'No, I didn't,' Stephen said.

'But you thought she might?'

'No, I didn't.'

'Was she at the match this afternoon?'

Stephen nodded.

'With him?'

He nodded again.

'Did they speak to you?'

Stephen could bear it no longer. 'I've told you everything I can,' he said, getting up. 'I've told you that

I'm afraid it is more than a sort of flirtation; and that's all I know for certain. Now, shut up. You can speak to her if you like when she comes in, but you needn't say I've told you anything, because as a matter of fact I haven't. And it's jolly well a quarter-past eight, and time we had supper. Why doesn't Ada bring it in?'

'Her mother's ill again,' Emily explained. 'Hilda and I've got to get it. It's only cold meat. What do you mean by you've told us everything you *can*, Stephen? Why can't you tell us *all* you know?'

Stephen made a grimace. 'I'll go down and see if dad's ready,' he said. 'Buck up.'

As he left the room he heard the quick insurgence of his sisters' eager whispering. There was something in the sound of their voices that produced the same effect, at once scared and rapturous, that had been revealed in Hilda's face when she had turned away from the window.

Stephen shrugged his shoulders. He was disgusted—with himself for having betrayed something of his mother's confidence; with his sisters for having wrung the secret out of him. He paused for a moment on the landing and then went up to his own room instead of down to the shop. He had a vague intention of 'thinking the whole thing out.' He even began to frame the beginning of a conversation with his mother. But when he was alone in his attic, a feeling of weariness came over him. He threw himself down on his bed, and instantly his thoughts forsook the subject that so persistently intrigued the minds of his father and his sisters, presenting in its place the pleasant memory of his own successes. He went over again his triumphs of the afternoon, and had a brilliant and convincing vision of the report of his innings being carried to little Margaret Weatherley. She would be certain to hear of it, and the knowledge must surely confirm him in her favour. Perhaps she

would guess that he had, in a way, made those runs for her.

He was walking in the clouds when he heard the impatient tinkle of the little bell calling him down to supper. The shrill imperative sound of it brought him back with an unpleasant jerk to the contemplation of the miserable reality that awaited him. He frowned moodily, as he washed his hands and face. He was in no hurry to get down. Why couldn't his mother have behaved decently?

7

They were very quiet at supper. Some definite change had taken place in their relations since they had been together in that room an hour before. It would have been impossible now for Emily or Hilda to have persisted in the demand for plain statement that had been interrupted by their mother's extraordinary departure.

The principal cause for this change, so far as it could be analysed, was in the behaviour of Mr Kirkwood. In ordinary circumstances the girls would have regarded their father's abstractions and hesitations as nothing more than a slight exaggeration of the 'absent-minded' manner he sometimes adopted; to-night they noted his every eccentricity as if it had a peculiar and alarming significance. When he dropped his fork, and seemed unable to decide whether or not to pick it up again, they looked at each other and at Stephen with raised eyebrows, surreptitiously conveying the implication that there was something ominous and sinister in these evidences of his distress. When they directly addressed their father, they spoke in the cajoling voice of one who humours an invalid.

Stephen was irritated by his sisters' air of tragedy.

His mind was still eager to luxuriate in the thought of himself as hero; and all this elaborate cringeing to the shadow of disaster indicated, in his opinion, a merely feminine love of emotion. The sense of his grievance returned to him, and directly supper was over he announced that he had 'a heap of work to do,' and went back to his own room.

His father took no notice of him. He had not once addressed him directly since he had come in. 'Poor old father,' Stephen reflected. 'It is frightfully rough on him. I wonder how much he knows?'

He settled down to work without any hesitation, but his reading only engaged a small part of his attention. He was reading history, and all the movement of it was coloured by the elation of his own recent success. Every now and again he would raise his eyes from his book, and indulge in a brief orgy of day dreaming.

It had been after nine when he came upstairs, and he was astonished to find that it was a quarter to eleven when he heard a tap at his door. At first he thought it might be his mother, and then he heard Hilda's voice asking if he had gone to bed.

'No; come in,' he called out, and Hilda entered with an expression of portentous gravity.

'What are we going to do, Stee?' she asked nervously.

'We can't *do* anything to-night,' he said irritably.

'We can't go to bed till she comes in,' Hilda said.

'Oh! Hasn't she come in?' he replied more gently. 'I didn't know what you meant. Where's father?'

'Well, he went upstairs, soon after you did,' she said. 'But he hasn't gone to bed. He's been walking up and down the room all the time.'

'Is Em down there?' Stephen asked.

'Of course,' Hilda said. 'We don't know what we ought to do.'

'I'll come down,' Stephen volunteered. He was impressed at last. The seeds of tragedy that his sisters had been so sedulously nursing, had suddenly flowered. He was newly aware of something ominous about his mother's absence. Subconsciously he had been supported by her promise of the night before. She had said that she would not go away yet, not for a month or two; and without having realised the grounds for his confidence he had relied on that promise of hers. Now it seemed probable that she had already broken it.

Stephen's face was not less anxious than his sisters' when he confronted them in the sitting-room.

'I say, she hasn't taken—any things away, has she?' he asked. 'Have you looked?'

'We couldn't,' Hilda replied. 'Father's been up there all the time. But she couldn't have taken much, any way. Not boxes or anything—we should have heard her. Besides, she hadn't time to pack.'

'I expect she'll be in directly,' Stephen said more cheerfully. 'She was rather annoyed with me this afternoon, as a matter of fact. I dare say this is only one of her tantrums.'

'What was she annoyed with you about?' Emily asked.

'Nothing particular. The usual sort of thing,' Stephen procrastinated.

For a few seconds no one spoke again, and Stephen's attention was drawn to the sound of the slow footsteps that paced backwards and forwards overhead.

'He's been going on like that for about two hours now,' Emily remarked.

'He ought to go to bed,' Stephen said. 'No use his sitting up.'

'Shall I go up and tell him that we're sitting up?' Hilda suggested.

Stephen hesitated. 'Perhaps I'd better go,' he said, after a moment's thought.

'Perhaps you'd better,' Emily agreed. 'Just say we'll wait up.'

'All serene,' said Stephen.

He went quickly out of the room, but on the stairs his mind misgave him. Suppose his father were to ask him any direct question, what could he say? He must pretend complete ignorance; that was the only possible course to take.

He stood outside his father's door for a full minute before he knocked, listening to the slow melancholy thudding of the footsteps that plodded endlessly backwards and forwards. Seven steps, then a pause at the turn, and seven steps back again. They ceased with a startling abruptness when Stephen knocked.

'It's only me, father,' Stephen said in a timid voice, but it apparently reached his father's understanding, for the steps instantly resumed their monotonous burden.

'I say, father,' Stephen began again, and then, realising the impossibility of carrying on a conversation through the thickness of a closed door, he turned the handle, opened the door a few inches, and continued, 'I say, father, we'll sit up, the girls and me. Hadn't you better go to bed?'

Mr Kirkwood stopped in his walk. He was near the end of his beat, close to the wall at the bed head, and he paused there with his back to Stephen, as if he were waiting for some further speech from him.

Stephen could think of nothing more to say. He found that his hand, still resting on the white porcelain door-knob, was cold and wet, and he wiped it on his jacket. He was afraid. His father looked so queer standing there with his face to the wall. Was it safe to leave him alone? He might do something awful if he wasn't watched.

'I say, father,' he tried again, making a great effort. 'Could I speak to you a moment?'

The familiar phrase seemed to recall Mr Kirkwood to a sense of his surroundings. He took one more step towards the wall, as if some mechanical impulse forbade him to turn without completing his beat, and then came half-way back across the room to where his son was standing.

Stephen was surprised to find that his father looked much as usual. He often responded to that request for an interview—especially if it foreshadowed a petition for money—with just such a look of pre-occupation with more important affairs as he was wearing now.

The shock came when the little bookseller began to speak. He began suddenly in the middle of a sentence, as if he were continuing a long conversation. And he spoke with a passionate air of demonstrating an argument, quite new in his son's experience of him.

'... But not the *only* explanation,' he said in a low, rapid voice. 'For instance, what more likely than that she's gone up to her father's. Something had put her out, no doubt. How should I know what? She was in one of her quiet moods before Stephen came in. I'd noticed that at tea-time. . . .'

'Father!' Stephen interrupted him, in a pained voice. It was horrible to hear his father talking about him as if he were not there confronting, almost touching, him. 'Shall I go up to grandfather's and see if she's there?' he went on, speaking fast and rather loud. 'We hadn't thought of that. I could easily pop up there and back in twenty minutes. And if she's there I'll bring her back with me. Shall I do that, father?'

Mr Kirkwood stared hard at his son's face for a moment and then nodded emphatically.

'All right, I'll go at once,' Stephen shouted reassuringly; instinctively attempting to reach the deeply

secluded place in which his father's spirit had taken refuge.

'I'll send the girls up to keep you company,' he added as he left the room.

But his father had already re-entered the deadly solitude of his monotonous, trudging walk. He was afraid of the bleak world of bitter reality. For the present he desired feverishly to hold his life at that period in which he could still cling fondly to the uncertain joys of hope. His argument had gone one step further, leaping the memory of that fatal moment in which he had accepted the horrible truth; he moment that he was determined at all costs to obliterate.

8

'I'm going round to grandfather's,' was Stephen's report to his sisters. 'We forgot she might be there. But, I say, I don't think you'd better leave father alone. He's awfully funny somehow. He talked as if I wasn't there. I told him I'd send you up for company. You'd better both go. I left the door open. He won't answer when you knock. I'm off now.'

He delivered his message breathlessly. He had put on his cap, and once or twice as he spoke he strained it farther down on his head as if he anticipated going out into a gale of wind. He wanted to avoid any further questions about his father's condition; but, beyond that, he had a feeling of tremendous urgency, as if the least delay on his part might lead to some irredeemable disaster.

The streets were still fairly full of people. Up at the other end of Long Causeway, the market place was noisy with Saturday night traffic. Stephen could hear the hoarse shoutings of the men at the stalls, selling off at

tremendous sacrifices all the perishable food that it would not be safe to keep over Sunday. As he came out on to the pavement, one of the new electric trams clattered by, packed with women of the poorer class, going home to the railwaymen's suburb down at New England. That was Stephen's direction also, and he hesitated for a moment whether he would not run after and board the tram—they never cared how much they were overloaded on Saturday night—but then he thought of the endless stoppages and delays that he would have to endure and decided that it would be quicker to run. He strained his cap down again with the same nervous movement he had twice repeated in the sitting-room, and set off at once. He was justified in his estimate of the tram's slowness. He passed it at the corner of Westgate and Park Road, and it never caught him again.

He was glad to be going to his grandfather's in Stamford Street instead of to Dr Threlfall's lodgings in the Lincoln Road. He saw his grandfather very seldom, but he was always easy to talk to. That other visit would have demanded considerable moral courage. Suppose she had been there, what could he have said before Dr Threlfall? One couldn't lose one's temper with a man like that; one couldn't very well argue with him. He had such an air of belonging to the ruling classes. It must be all his mother's fault. She must have encouraged him. But it was any odds that he wasn't . . . Stephen could not, even in his thoughts, say 'in love.' It was too grotesque, too horrible to suggest that Threlfall was in love with Stephen's mother. Love in this connection was a word sacred to such bright and beautiful ardours as he might one day feel for Margaret Weatherley. In relation to his mother and Dr Threlfall, the word had a coarse and rather disreputable significance. But just suppose . . . No, he wouldn't even suppose so repulsive an idea. His mother had certainly

spent the evening with her father in Stamford Street. Stephen would find her there and persuade her to come home with him. After that it would be all right. They were all willing enough to get back to the old terms again. She must see that that was the only thing to do.

It was a warm night and Stephen was wet with perspiration when he reached No. 69 Stamford Street and, looking up at the first-floor window of the dingy little house, saw with relief that there was still a light in his grandfather's room. The window was wide open but he could hear no sound of voices. He had meant to call 'mother,' but the portent of that silence influenced him to substitute 'grandfather.' If, after all, she were not there, and the people of the house heard him, they might think it funny that he should be going about the town at a quarter to twelve looking for his mother.

He called up to the window in a secret, suppressed voice, but the response was instantaneous. He heard a chair pushed hastily back and almost immediately old Edwardes appeared at the window.

'Is that you, Stephen?' he replied softly. 'Thought I recognised your step coming up the road. What do you want?'

'Is mother there?' Stephen whispered.

'Lord, no,' his grandfather replied.

'Hasn't she been here all the evening?'

'Haven't seen her for more than a week,' old Edwardes said. 'Why?'

Stephen felt as if he had been suddenly doused with cold water. 'May I come up, grandfather?' he said, with a shiver. 'I want to speak to you.'

'I'll come down and let you in,' his grandfather responded at once; and a few seconds later Stephen heard the lock of the front door gently turned.

'They're all in bed, and asleep probably,' old Edwardes

whispered as soon as the door had been opened. 'Don't make a noise, boy,' He had a candle in his hand and paused on the threshold, staring at his grandson's face. 'Has she gone?' and then without waiting for a reply, put a hand on Stephen's shoulder, drew him into the passage, cautiously closed the door, and pointed to the stairs. 'Mind the third step up,' he said. 'The tread's broken.'

'So she's gone, eh?' he repeated as soon as he and his grandson were safe in the neat little bed-sitting-room. He spoke in a low, clear voice that Stephen unconsciously imitated when he replied:—

'Well, we don't know. We thought she might be here.'

Edwardes shook his head and began to fill his pipe. 'Let's have the facts,' he said. 'I shall know then. Don't raise your voice. I can hear as well as ever, thank God.'

Stephen gave the facts as well as he could, omitting, however, all mention of his mother's interview with him the night before and of their quarrel in the afternoon.

'Ay!' Edwardes murmured, when his grandson had apparently finished. 'Have you ever seen him, Threlfall, I mean?'

'I met him this afternoon on the cricket field,' Stephen said.

His grandfather thrust out his lower lip, smoking steadily and gazing down at the empty grate. 'He's one of us,' he remarked thoughtfully. 'She was bound to go to him, sooner or later. I've known it for six weeks or more. They were here together just over a week ago, and I talked it over with her afterwards. She's as head-strong as ever. She would marry your father, though I did all I could to stop her. This time, I'm not so sure that I want to. It's hard for you to understand, at your age, being her son and all; but the wonder to me is not

that she should be kicking over the traces now, but that she shouldn't have done it long ago. I fancy it's only you that have kept her, Stephen.'

'Me?' Stephen ejaculated.

'Ay, you,' his grandfather said. 'I suppose you don't feel that you were worth it.'

'I don't understand, grandfather,' Stephen returned.

'Never having been either a father or a mother you probably wouldn't,' Edwardes remarked. 'And I can't explain to you a thing you've never felt.' He paused before he added. 'Have you been failing her lately?'

'I—I didn't want her to—to go away, of course,' Stephen said.

'Then you knew all about it?' Edwardes inquired keenly.

'She told me a little about it last night,' Stephen admitted; 'but we all knew there was something wrong—before that.'

His grandfather turned and looked him straight in the eyes as he fired his next question.

'You haven't been falling in love yourself?' he asked.

'Oh! no, grandfather; rather not,' Stephen protested, blushing vividly.

'Quite sure?' old Edwardes pressed him.

'Quite,' Stephen affirmed.

'Well, does she think you have?'

'Oh! no; how could she?'

'All the same she probably knows,' the old man said enigmatically.

'Knows what?' Stephen inquired, greatly puzzled.

'That there's some difference in you; that you haven't been giving her your best attention, or devotion, or something like that. She must be first. You've just got to the age when you're sure to be casting sheep's eyes at some girl or another.'

Stephen's face flamed again. 'But——' he began to protest.

His grandfather interrupted him.

'I'm not putting the blame of this on to you,' he said. 'It was bound to happen sooner or later. You couldn't be expected to help yourself. Better that you shouldn't. But if I know anything of Cecilia—and if I don't know her, no one does or ever will—she's noticed some difference in you the last week or two, that . . .'

'Oh! no, not as long ago as that,' Stephen put in. 'If there was anything at all, it was only yesterday.'

'What happened yesterday, then?' his grandfather asked.

'Nothing, really,' Stephen protested.

'You're mighty red about it, anyway,' old Edwardes commented.

Stephen fidgeted impatiently. 'Oh, does it matter about me, grandfather?' he said.

'Ay, it seems to me that it does,' the old man replied. 'I can't help thinking that, somehow or another, you've put the finish to this affair of hers. However, in another way, it's of no account. What we have to do is to see that she doesn't make too big a fool of herself and him. We'd better find her, and there's only one place we need look for her, and that's at Threlfall's rooms in the Lincoln Road. I'll come with you, boy. We've the excuse that your father's ill—ill enough for our purpose, in any case. Come along.'

He got up, knocked out his pipe, took down his soft felt hat from the wall, lighted the candle, and then turned out the gas and led the way downstairs.

Stephen followed him with the comfortable feeling of one who goes under the command of a trusted leader and expert. His grandfather was, in the eyes of the town, nothing more than a piano-tuner. Indeed he was not

even a satisfactory piano-tuner; for he was unquestionably eccentric, and his standing did not justify eccentricity, a peculiarity only justifiable by wealth, position, or great fame. Yet even his critics admitted—some of them solely by their omissions—that there was an effect of breed about old Edwardes. He was shabby, but he was always clean; and he had an air of authority with the shopkeepers that compelled an unwilling respect. If he had not been so morose and self-centred, he might have found a few friends.

He hardly spoke to his grandson as they made their way back towards the town, entering the Lincoln Road from its upper, comparatively poverty-stricken end. As a road it exhibited three definite stages. For the first quarter of a mile out of the town it had all the marks of a first-class residential suburb. The houses were detached, stood in their own grounds, sometimes well back from the road, and were the 'residences' of the town's more prosperous professional men. James Dickinson, the builder, lived there. But farther up the style steadily declined. The houses were smaller, closer to the road, and nearer together, rapidly merging into that phase of semi-detachment which led on to the disaster of villas in a row, and, ultimately, at the New England end, into workmen's cottages.

Dr Threlfall's lodgings were about half a mile out of the town in one of the transition villas—semi-detached, but still with a good ten yards of privacy between them and the road, an endowment that was emphasised by the protection of hedges in laurel, privet, or yew, behind dwarf walls with an 'ornamental' iron railing. Many of the gardens boasted lime, laburnum, acacia, or sweet-chestnut trees, and the effect on a summer night was pleasantly suggestive of greenery and seclusion.

'It's number 123; the house is called "Yaxley,"' Stephen said as they came into the odour of respectability.

'Do you know it, grandfather? I've never been there.'

'I know it,' Edwardes returned, and added bitterly, 'I've tuned the piano there for twenty years. There's an old Collard in Threlfall's room—not a bad instrument still. This is the house.'

Stephen could just read the name 'Yaxley' in elaborate capitals by the light of the street-lamp. The gold of the lettering was tarnished and chipped, and the gate itself in urgent need of re-painting. His grandfather pushed it open with a gesture that was almost violent, and when they had passed through, let it swing back by its own weight. As they walked up the ten yards of path that imitated the pretentiousness of a 'drive,' they were accompanied by the sound of the gate's accelerated clicking, as the latch passed and repassed the post with a swiftly diminishing beat.

It occurred to Stephen that his grandfather was deliberately making all the noise he could to warn his daughter and Dr Threlfall of the coming invasion of their solitude; and old Edwardes's further approach served to confirm this suspicion. He tramped with a somewhat unnecessary harshness on the recently turned gravel of the path, and when he had reached the house he passed the front door, and then tapped lightly on the french window of the ground-floor room beyond. There was a light in that room, but the blind was down.

As they waited for a reply, Stephen could hear the faintly startled whispering of disturbed voices. Nearly a minute must have passed before the blind flew suddenly up, and the figure of Dr Threlfall appeared silhouetted against the light of the room. He paused for another few seconds, peering out, before he opened the window.

'It's all right,' murmured old Edwardes. 'Stephen's here. He has come with a message. His father's in a queer way.'

He did not ask if Cecilia were there. Perhaps he had seen her, although to Stephen she was still invisible, sitting on the sofa behind the lamp on the farther side of the room. Or it may be that her father's sensitive ear had recognised her voice during the hushed colloquy that had preceded Threlfall's appearance at the window.

'You'd better come in,' Threlfall said with a quick glance over his shoulder; and he moved aside to let old Edwardes and Stephen enter, shutting the french window behind them, and re-drawing the blind.

9

'What is it? What's the matter?' Cecilia asked calmly.

Stephen looked at her with an ashamed and hesitating curiosity. In the course of the last few hours the relationship between them had been obscurely changed. She was no longer above criticism. Indeed, at this moment he was aware of a strong feeling of resentment against her—a feeling that was intensified by her present appearance. She looked so happy; more than happy—elated. He had seen her in that state of exaltation before, when she had had a success at some concert. She would come home flushed and brilliant, to entertain them with the story of her triumph. Stephen had worshipped her on those occasions, but now her happiness annoyed and hurt him. He remembered his father's misery and his sisters' anxiety. What right had she, he thought, to disregard them all as she had done? Also some sense within him told Stephen that there was a vital difference between the woman who had walked out of the house in Long Causeway that evening and the woman who was sitting on the sofa with that strange look of exaltation. What had caused that

difference he dared not ask himself as yet. But the effect of it was to cut her off from him and change their relations. He might have experienced much the same sense of bewildering inexplicable loss if the lover he had adored had proved to be the mistress of another man.

He looked down at the carpet, sulkily fumbling with his cap, as he answered his mother's question.

'We didn't know where you were' he said.

'And now that you do know . . . ?' she replied lightly.

'Are you coming back?' Stephen muttered.

Cecilia shook her head.

Old Edwardes had sat down in a chair at one end of the centre table, and Threlfall stood near him. Both of them had an air of waiting, of definitely refusing to interfere until this clash between mother and son reached a climax that directly evoked the need for their intervention.

'Why not?' Stephen asked, still in the same sulky, abashed tone. He thought that she was taking an unfair advantage of him; that he should not have been called upon to make his appeal in the presence of his grandfather and a stranger.

'You'll know some day, Stephen,' Cecilia replied, more gently.

'But, mother, you don't mean to say that you're not coming back with me—now?' he protested.

'I do,' she said.

He frowned and fidgeted. 'But—you must,' he grumbled.

Cecilia shook her head. Her expression was one of slightly contemptuous amusement.

Old Edwardes cleared his throat and made a movement as if he were about to speak, and then, apparently changing his mind, he leant a little forward and covered his eyes with his hands.

'Why not?' Stephen repeated.

'I explained everything to you last night,' Cecilia said. 'Have you forgotten already? Surely you don't want me to say it all over again.'

'I haven't forgotten that you promised me you'd wait at least a month,' Stephen grumbled.

'So many things have happened since then,' Cecilia said, and looked at her lover. Stephen saw the signal of happiness that passed between them and it aggravated his feeling of grievance.

'You've no right to go away,' he said, with a greater boldness than he had yet shown, and his frown deepened into a scowl.

'I've a right to live my own life,' his mother replied without anger. 'I've devoted all the best of it to you. Now I'm going to be frankly selfish. You needn't use all the conventional arguments, Stephen. I know them all much better than you do, and they don't affect me one little bit. You must try and think of me as an individual in future, instead of as a slave to that shop and house in Long Causeway. I'm emancipated. I've become a human being, like yourself.'

'We know it must be very hard for you to understand, Stephen,' Threlfall put in, and his gentle voice had the same effect of tranquil authority that it had had on the cricket field. 'But you must try to see things from another point of view. If we are being selfish, aren't you being selfish too?'

Stephen made no reply. In his present mood his instinctive respect for Threlfall as a social superior was almost overcome by indignation and resentment. After all, this man was the thief, the real culprit. *He* had made no sacrifices. He had just come as a perfect stranger, and with no kind of justification was preparing to wreck the lives of at least four people. He might be a gentleman, but he was behaving like a cad now.

As he considered these things, Stephen's anger began

to boil again, but before he could give any expression to it, old Edwardes asked a question, and for a time Stephen became nothing more than a spectator. The other three persons in the room seemed to overlook and forget him.

'What are you going to do then?' Cecilia's father asked. 'I don't mean in the future, I mean now, to-night.'

'She's going up to town by the half-past two train,' Threlfall explained. 'It runs as usual on Sunday morning. She can go to the Great Northern Hotel when she gets in . . .'

'And afterwards I shall go on to Rhoda Bellew's,' Cecilia added. 'She'll understand. She asked me to go and stay with her when she was singing down here last winter.'

'You're giving up the Cathedral organ, of course?' Edwardes asked, turning to Threlfall.

He nodded carelessly. 'As a matter of fact it's giving me up,' he said. 'Or rather the Dean is. I saw him this afternoon, and he gave me the choice of resigning Cecilia or the organ. Naturally I gave up the organ. I'm going on for another fortnight—to save appearances. I promised that I wouldn't see Cecilia again during that time. And as she's going to London, that will be easy. To-night's an exception.'

'After that, you'll go to London, too, I suppose,' commented Edwardes. 'What do you propose to do? No more organs for you after this, you know, my boy, and I can't see *you* tuning pianos.'

'I'm doing the score for a burlesque,' Threlfall said with rather a wry face. 'There may be some money in that. It isn't altogether a speculation. Arthur Joyce has written the book. I've known him for years, and he has often pestered me to write with him. I know it's rather a come down from one point of view, but, as a

matter of fact, I've really got rather a feeling for light stuff of that sort. I can already hear some of the things I've done on the barrel-organs.'

Edwardes shrugged his shoulders. 'Lord, I don't blame you,' he said. 'One kind of hack-work is no better nor worse than another.'

'And I shall try to get engagements for telling stories,' Cecilia put in gaily. 'Rhoda Bellew said I could, easily, if I wanted to. And, father, as soon as we're settled and going strong, we want you to give up your drudgery here and come and join us. Don't we, Christopher?'

Threlfall nodded emphatically.

Stephen listened to their high-hearted plans for the future with his mind full of amazement. Not one of them had, apparently, any thought either for the tragic drama of the present situation, or for the misery they were bringing upon himself, his sisters, and his father. Their one idea was to escape from Medboro'. If they were free and independent their innocent victims might suffer as they would. It was, perhaps, comprehensible that his grandfather and Dr Threlfall should feel like that, but it was still incredible to Stephen that his mother could instantly leave all her family—cut herself off and begin an entirely new life. She was his; his very own belonging; and he was surely an intimate, essential part of her existence. He was too astonished to be angry any more. He stared at her, longing for something to break; some detestable spell that had been put upon him or her, and had horribly changed all the values of his existence.

It was Threlfall who presently realised the complete omission of Stephen from all their plans.

'It's hard luck on you, Stephen,' he said, turning to him.

'What about the others?' Stephen asked. He did not look at Threlfall as he spoke. He had overcome his

sulkiness, and he stared directly at his mother, prepared to entreat her for the first time.

She bit her lip and shrugged her shoulders.

'Father's awfully queer,' he went on, still watching her, and a pleading tone came into his voice as he continued, 'He's nearly off his head, I think. After supper, he was walking up and down in the bedroom for more than three hours. And—and he spoke funnily. He talked to me as if I was some one else. I believe he'll go absolutely mad. I do really.'

'That's only a kind of pose,' Cecilia replied coldly. 'He has often been like that before. You may not have seen it, but I have.'

'I don't believe you have, not like he was to-night,' pleaded Stephen.

'He has had over twenty years of my life,' she said sharply. 'I can't afford to give any more.'

For a moment Stephen was repelled, angry with her again for her heartlessness, but then he saw her lip quiver, and his mood instantly changed. She had never resorted to tears as a method of getting her own way. She was above that weakness. Only once had Stephen ever seen her cry, and that was three years ago when her father had been dangerously ill. And the sight of her weakness touched him as nothing else could have done. He took a step towards her, and there were tears in his own voice as he said:—

'Oh! mother, don't go. Don't leave me.'

It was the one appeal that she had dreaded.

There, so near now, the gates of Happiness stood wide open for her to pass through. Her love for Christopher Threlfall had been the deciding factor in her determination to enter the promised land; but the temptation included far more than that. She saw so vividly the two alternatives: on the one hand the dull duty of her life in Medboro' with all that it implied; on the other the lure

of the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional freedom that was still possible for her. All the load was on one scale. Christopher, London, the impulse to self-expression; against these there was no weight at all. The thought of her husband, of her two Kirkwood daughters, of the life of Medboro', only served to make the other picture shine more brilliantly attractive. The single influence of remorse and desire that held her back was Stephen. And she would not, dared not, consider it. She had but to take one more step to pass into the land of Perfect Delight—she had no doubt of its perfection—it would be sheer folly to go back. She could not go back.

She had hidden her face in her hands, but the grief that shook her was due not to doubt but to the pain of making this single sacrifice.

'Mother!' Stephen besought her again. He had come quite close to her now. He was, she knew, ready to kneel by her, to put his arms round her and destroy the whole of her future happiness. She must make one final effort whatever it cost her.

She lifted her head and there was no sign of tears on her face.

'Oh! Stephen, don't be so silly,' she said.

And then she laughed; and the laugh conquered her; and the sound of it was evil. She knew it herself, and yet was unable to check it. She had released the demon that dwelt in her, and he had taken possession of her body and was using it to express his own hideous triumph.

Threlfall and her father started and instinctively moved towards her as if to push Stephen away, and hide this shame from him. They recognised that laugh as the sign of hysteria; and were ready to excuse it. She had been too hardly tried. She was no longer responsible for her emotions. The strain had been too great for her sensitive temperament, and although the sound of that

laugh was horribly repellent to Christopher Threlfall, it had no effect upon his love for Cecilia.

But to Stephen, his mother's laugh was a complete and desolating catastrophe. He turned away from her in a paroxysm of disgust and terror. It seemed to him that she had been suddenly and finally revealed to him as a thing of evil.

10

He blundered feebly and yet with a violent impatience to get out of the room. The blind and the fastening of the window resisted him with a tantalising inertia. He was afraid of being held back by his grandfather or Dr Threlfall; and he was hysterically eager to escape from the sight of his mother and the sound of her jeering laughter.

When he had at last forced open the reluctant window he ran as if he were pursued. . . .

The reflection of his mother's hysteria disappeared long before he reached home, but the effect of it remained with him. It seemed, indeed, as if the experiences of those two days, working up at last to this hateful climax, had completely killed his love for Cecilia. He saw their whole past life together from a new point of view. He began to believe that she had always deceived him; that in her tenderest and fondest moments, she must, in her heart, have been jeering at him. He could not reconcile the picture of his mother as he had known her with that of the woman he had seen in the Lincoln Road. And because in that, his last sight of her, he had been strung up to a pitch of abnormal sensitiveness he had received an almost indelible impression of having at last realised the whole ghastly, revolting truth.

She had, he thought, finally revealed her true self. And even when, in the course of years, the horror of that night had very sensibly faded, the deduction still remained and was confirmed by reason. He remembered all that was callous and selfish in her treatment of himself and his father after she had fallen in love with Christopher Threlfall. He came to believe that she had never cared for himself.

There was still one more ordeal for Stephen to face before that tragic day was ended, and as he rang the house-door bell in Long Causeway, an immense feeling of desolation and exhaustion all but overpowered him. When Emily opened the door, he stumbled over the step and nearly fell into the hall.

'Stephen!?' Emily ejaculated. 'Is anything the matter?'

He leant against the wall of the passage. 'I'm about done,' he said, and as he made the admission his remaining strength seemed to ebb out of him. His knees began to tremble. He would have slipped to the floor if Emily had not caught hold of him.

'Stephen! what's happened?' she besought him, in an awe-stricken voice.

'It's all up,' he said. He knew that he was acting, but he found relief in a certain insincerity of manner. It was so much easier to tell Emily like this; and he had to tell her. He was being theatrical and unreal. He could still have pulled himself together if he had made an effort. But though he had the strength to conquer his physical weakness, he could not face the stress of an intellectual tussle with his sisters; the task of convincing them by tedious explanations. He wanted to be alone, to lie down and forget.

'D'you mean she's—gone?' Emily asked tragically.

'Yes,' Stephen said.

'With—him?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know?'

'I can't tell you now. I'll tell you in the morning,' he gasped. 'Help me up to bed, old girl.'

He was genuinely surprised to find that Hilda had joined them while he was speaking.

The eternal questioning was beginning all over again, and he wrenched himself away from Emily, tottered to the foot of the stairs and began with an exaggerated difficulty to climb them. His sisters came to help him then; and as the three of them struggled together up the narrow staircase, he heard the anxious whispering exchange of question and answer between them. He did not care what they did, if only they would not cross-examine him. There were some things that he could never tell them; and he was too tired just now to conceal the truth.

He allowed them to help him right up to his own room and on to his bed. He was afraid that if he gave any sign of recovered strength or independence they would immediately take advantage of it in order to slake the fierce thirst of their curiosity.

'Shall you be all right?' Hilda asked, when he was, at last, deposited on the bed.

He nodded. He was afraid even to ask a question as to his father's condition.

Emily saved him that risk.

'Father's asleep,' she said.

He nodded again.

'We made him go to bed,' Hilda added.

He shut his eyes and pretended not to hear.

When they had gone he began to undress. He was certainly tired, physically and mentally weary, but he was not so completely done that he found any difficulty in standing unsupported.

As he thankfully nestled down between the sheets he

began to recall the doings of the last eighteen hours, remembering with a feeling of surprise and pleasure that he had made 136 not out for the School against the Town.

His last waking thought was of Margaret Weatherley. His mind absolutely refused to consider any thought of his mother.

Chapter Three

I

CÆCILIA'S bitter description of her husband's temporary madness as 'a kind of pose,' was based on one of those half-truths that account for so many misunderstandings between husband and wife. She had seen him in the same condition on earlier occasions, and the natural bias of her temperament had quickened her recognition of the histrionics involved. That phase of his reaction was a thing she knew and could appreciate. She could test it by her own feelings and habit. The vital error she made was that having correctly estimated a mode of presentation, she mistook it for a cause; just as the medical profession, only a few years ago, mistook the symptoms of hysteria. For behind little Kirkwood's acting lay a real and dangerous mental disturbance.

The habit of concealing his weakness under a pretence of absent-mindedness had been growing upon him for twenty years. From the first moment of his astounding engagement to the beautiful and accomplished Cecilia Edwardes, he had been handicapped by a sense of his own unworthiness. In the early days he had openly expressed this realisation by an exaggerated humility. His abasement had been frank and complete. And in the beginning his adoration had flattered Cecilia's girlish vanity. He was ten years older than she, and she found a new delight in this absolute exercise of her authority. With her father she had been, at best, on terms of equality, and as a musician she had always been his pupil. Now she ruled.

These relations, however, could not survive the protracted stresses of marriage. To Cecilia, her husband's prostration soon changed from a delight to a bore. There were no possibilities for experience and diversion in the exercise of so absolute an autocracy as she was called upon to wield. But even if she had not shown plainly enough that humility became tedious when it represented the single virtue of one's husband, little Kirkwood could not have maintained that attitude indefinitely. A measure of self-esteem, in however strange a form, is essential to every human being; and something within us resists and cries out against the habit of self-depreciation, as soon as it becomes marked enough to constitute a danger. Little Kirkwood had to find a disguise that would cover his inefficiency from his wife, and incidentally from the remainder of his limited world. He found it in an ideal of scholarship combined with a conventional eccentricity of manner.

The pose was never in the fullest sense deliberate. He did not invent it, he could hardly be said to have discovered it. It represented his natural escape into fantasy, and presently it overpowered him.

It is true that in ordinary circumstances the harmless insanity that developed after his wife's desertion would not have killed him. He might have lived to the age of seventy or more, regarded as a harmless and slightly childish eccentric, if his dependence upon Cecilia had been the normal dependence of a husband upon an admired wife. But it seems as if Cecilia had been the single vitalising influence of Andrew Kirkwood's existence; as if he must have lived through her personality. It is certain that from the time she left him he began slowly and inevitably to die of sheer inanition.

His children never knew whether or not he realised the facts as they were known to themselves. The girls, and more particularly Emily, displayed a patience in

dealing with him that was nothing short of heroic; for he was a constant source of irritation to them. They were sane, according to the common standard, and by the same standard he was not. And they never had the consolations of knowing for certain that he was insane and of being able to treat him accordingly. His single marked delusion—the one piece of evidence that his children could cite as a ground for certainty—was that their mother might return at any moment. Sometimes he appeared to realise her long absence, and expect her return as an event already too long delayed. At other times his manner and his occasional references to her implied the belief that she had never gone away.

And to Stephen's mind at least, Cecilia's bitter comment had insinuated a doubt that he was never able successfully to evade. Even when his father's delusion grew daily more and more marked, Stephen was still pricked by the uncertainty as to how far it was genuine; whether, indeed, it was not from first to last an almost infantile pretence, a feeble means of escape from responsibility and shame.

2

Cecilia only wrote once to her family after she left them. The letter was addressed to Emily, and received by her on the following Monday. She interpreted it as a gesture of defiance and contempt, but it had not been so intended. Cecilia had written with a single object, which was to obtain possession of her wardrobe, and she had not adopted the tone most likely to serve her desire. She had made no apology, no explanation. She had simply asked that her personal belongings might be packed and sent to her at the house of Rhoda Bellew, the famous contralto. The letter began 'My dear

Emily,' was signed 'Your affectionate mother,' and made no kind of reference to Cecilia's manner of leaving Medboro'. It might have been a hasty note dashed off on some commonplace occasion asking a small favour.

As she had written it, she must have known that her daughters would be offended, outraged; but perhaps she could not bear the thought of any further contact with her family just then. She was afraid to consider her old life in any terms, save those of her own past sacrifices. She was determined to be happy at any cost; and she had to keep the excuse for her determination constantly before her, knowing that if she once began to examine and encourage her own conscience she would be for ever tormented by a demon of regret. She had dared to claim happiness and now she meant to enjoy it.

Stephen was surprised at the effect of that letter upon his sisters. It had been received by the second post, and he knew nothing of it until he came in from school at five o'clock. In the interval that had elapsed since he had left home in the morning, he had, such is the amazing resilience of youth, taken a long step towards recovery.

One of his problems had been resolved for him by his achievement in the Town match. The petty intrigue against him, due to Hall secundus' jealousy, and only possible because it had involved a suggestion of salacity, had been utterly defeated. The two Halls and their allies, might, in other circumstances, have succeeded in 'ragging' Stephen quite unpleasantly; but if you attempt to rag the school hero you only bring hostility and contempt upon yourselves. Moreover, the rumour concerning the measles, had been a true one. The daughter of a neighbouring gentleman-farmer had now developed them beyond question; and as she had been in the company of Miss Weatherley only two days before the sickness had declared itself, all the head master's family had

been sent away at once in order to safeguard the school. Thus, against the temporary canonisation of one protagonist and in the absence of the other, Hall Minor's shameful plot had no least chance of ripening. Indeed, by way of definitely winding up the episode, he made a private apology to Stephen, an apology that, in the glory of the moment, Stephen magnanimously accepted.

And, so far, the town had not got wind of the full flavour of the Kirkwood scandal. Old Edwardes had taken his daughter to the station in the early hours of Sunday; and even if any one had seen them, the fact that she had gone up to London by so unusual a train was rather feeble material for gossip in face of Dr Threlfall's visible presence in the Cathedral the same morning.

Stephen certainly suffered one qualm of sickness when at five o'clock he entered the house decorously by the side door,—he had an instinctive desire to avoid his father—but he was quite prepared to take up his life under the new conditions and, as his mother had done, to put the past behind him.

Emily, still with her hat on, met him at the top of the stairs.

'Come in here, Stephen,' she said, indicating the sitting-room door. 'Father hasn't come up yet.' And she took him by the arm and led him into the sitting-room with an air of mysterious urgency.

Stephen submitted with a sudden thrill of fear. 'What is it?' he asked, on a note of alarm, as soon as the door had been shut with a conspiratorial secrecy behind them. Hilda was standing by the table with a look of anxious expectancy on her face.

'Look at that,' exclaimed Emily, producing the infamous letter from her pocket.

Stephen read it without astonishment. Those curt, commonplace phrases seemed to him the appropriate

expression of the new woman he had so penetratingly discovered when his mother had laughed at his pleading. This was the letter of a hard, selfish woman, he thought; of the woman who had been so unhappily revealed to him.

'Well?' he remarked. 'What of it? What else did you expect?'

'She needn't think we'll send them,' put in Hilda passionately.

'Great Scott, why ever not?' asked Stephen.

'I won't touch her things,' Emily announced with a restrained and solemn violence.

'What are you going to do with them then?' Stephen asked, looking from one to the other. He realised that he was witnessing a declaration that was nothing short of religious in its refusal to approach contamination. He could not begin to understand it.

'She'll have to have her clothes,' he went on, as no reply to his question was forthcoming.

Emily had found a focus for her stare, and gazed with an immense fixity at a stain on the tablecloth as she said, 'She's a bad woman, Stephen.'

'Yes, I know, we've had all that,' he replied irritably, remembering the awful inquisition that had been held the previous afternoon, for the purpose of extorting from him a full and precise report of everything that had happened at the house in the Lincoln Road. He had been hard put to it more than once to conceal the essential detail of his mother's great refusal, but he had given a fairly inclusive account of the affair up to the moment of Cecilia's rejection of his appeal. 'But supposing she is,' he continued, 'I'm hanged if I can see why you shouldn't send her her things. If you won't, I suppose father or I will have to do it . . .'

'You couldn't ask *father* to do it,' Emily interrupted him in a shocked voice. She spoke as if her brother had suggested some fearful outrage.

Stephen found himself, as he often did in these disputes with his sisters, struggling against some insidious feminine force that he had no power to battle against. 'Then do you mean I've got to do it?' he asked.

'Why *should* she have them?' posed Hilda. 'She hasn't considered us, why should we bother about her?'

Stephen could not understand their bitterness. He was nervously hurt by his mother's desertion, but he had no desire for revenge.

'They're hers,' was all the answer he could find.

Hilda sniffed, as if the fact of the things belonging to her mother was sufficient explanation for her own refusal to touch them.

'You *must* see that *we* can't have anything to do with them,' Emily said.

'Don't see it at all,' Stephen responded. 'It seems to me the most drivelling rot. *Why* can't you?'

The two girls looked at one another, exchanging a confidence that deplored the more obvious limitations of the masculine intelligence. They were both perfectly convinced at the moment that they could not touch their mother's things; but they were quite unable to explain why.

'Well, I'm not going to, anyway,' Hilda declared.

Emily brooded in profound acquiescence.

Stephen was tempted to slam out of the room. These insidious virginal resistances stultified and angered him. He controlled himself, because he dreaded the prospect of having to pack his mother's clothes. He saw that task as one promising innumerable difficulties and embarrassments. It was different for the girls. They were used to that sort of thing. It wasn't a man's work. He searched his mind for arguments.

'Look here,' he said; 'you were jolly well horrified when I said father might have to do it, but it must be

a lot worse for him to have her things all over the place like they are now. Besides, if you feel like you say you do, I should have thought you'd have been glad to have them out of the house. I don't know why you talk about it as if her things were sort of poisonous, but you do; so hadn't you better get rid of 'em as soon as you can? I'll—I'll help you, if you like.'

Hilda laughed. 'Oh! thank you, that would be nice,' she said.

'Of course, you couldn't help us, Stephen,' Emily gravely explained.

It suddenly appeared as if the thought of Stephen's undertaking the task was even more dreadful than the prospect of doing it themselves.

Stephen shrugged his shoulders in hopeless perplexity.

'Well, will *you* do it?' he asked.

'We should have to wait until father was out of the way,' Emily said, as though no other obstacle had ever occurred to her.

Stephen began to think that his brilliant argument had actually won the success it deserved. 'You see my point about not leaving the things about?' he said hopefully.

'Oh! it isn't *that*,' Hilda replied contemptuously, and Emily concurred with a gloomy sedateness.

Their father came up to tea before anything further could be added, and the subject was not reopened until the next evening, when Stephen remembered it with a shock of dismay, in the middle of his 'preparation.' He felt curiously responsible about this affair. It seemed to him a matter of immense importance to get rid of those intimate witnesses of his mother's personality.

He went downstairs at once and found his sisters alone together in the kitchen.

'I say, what are you going to do about those things?' he whispered.

'They've gone,' Emily said, in the tone of one who pronounced judgment.

Stephen hesitated a moment, debating whether it were worth while to ask for an explanation of their inscrutable attitude towards the whole affair. He decided that it was not.

'Oh! good,' he said, and returned to his interrupted work.

He was aware of a feeling of great relief. It seemed to him as if some unpleasant, disturbing temptation had been suddenly removed.

3

The manner of Cecilia's flight entirely spoilt the dramatic values of the scandal. The deduction that she had run away with the Cathedral organist could only be arrived at by tedious degrees. Even Aunt Eleanor was partly deceived, and being willing, on this occasion, to minimise the gossip, did her best to maintain the theory that her sister-in-law was spending her summer holiday in London with the famous contralto, Rhoda Bellew.

That theory was a sudden inspiration of Hilda's, delivered with a bright effect of the commonplace when Mrs Bell came up alone on the Wednesday afternoon after the disaster, to make inquiries on her own account.

Emily let her aunt in, and Mrs Bell came up to the sitting-room with an air of making the most friendly of calls. Not until she had been talking to her two nieces for quite five minutes did she ask, with a marked change of manner, where their mother was.

'Oh! didn't you know?' replied Hilda, surprisingly equal to the occasion. 'She's staying in London with Miss Bellew.'

'But your father's still at home,' Mrs Bell returned suspiciously.

'Yes; he's not going. He hates London,' Hilda said.

'When did she go?' inquired her aunt.

'Saturday evening,' Hilda replied.

'And how long is she going to be away?'

'We don't know,' Hilda said, with a little gesture of despair. 'A month or two anyway.'

Mrs Bell looked as if she thought the whole affair was very 'unfortunate'—her favourite word—and then asked, with an effect of making a great confidence, if they had heard that Dr Threlfall was leaving.

'No! Is he? I saw him in the town, this morning,' replied Hilda.

'I heard that he was,' Mrs Bell said; 'but there mayn't be anything in it, of course. I'm sure I hope he isn't. It would be so unfortunate if there was any kind of scandal just now. You know people will say things, and your mother is so imprudent.'

She pressed her inquiry no further on that occasion, and although she took the most despondent view of the situation when she reported the visit to her husband, she turned a cheerful face to the town's questions.

Another circumstance that favoured Hilda's bright idea was the fact that Dr Threlfall did not actually leave Medboro' for nearly six weeks after Cecilia had gone. There had been a difficulty in replacing him, and he had consented to stay on until his successor could be appointed. Walker, the assistant, was too young to be left in sole charge. But although the town knew that their organist was often away for two or three nights in the middle of the week, and did not fail to put the worst possible interpretation on the discovery that he spent that time in London; the affair, generally, lacked that point and definition necessary for a really satisfactory scandal. The thing was stale, talked out, and all the

piquancy of it exhausted before the suspicion of Cecilia's infamy was finally confirmed more than five months after she had run away. She was seen in town just after Christmas at a theatre in company with Threlfall, by Adam Neale, Folliott's managing clerk, and the fact gradually became known without causing any important revival of interest. In those five months Cecilia had ceased to intrigue the attention of Medboro', and now the gossips found that they had always expected her to do something of the sort. If this confirmation of their most hopeful prophecies had any effect at all, it was in the direction of stimulating their expressions of sympathy for Cecilia's husband. He had so splendidly justified the principles of the moralists by 'going off his head.' He was still carrying on his business, but every one had noticed how 'queer' he was getting.

Also there were many other affairs to distract the attention about the time of Cecilia's elopement. Old Mr Lynneker, the rector of Halton—an important village some four miles out of the town—died in August; and very soon afterwards the engagement of his youngest son to the niece of the Bishop's wife had been announced—quite a surprising affair for those who remembered young Mr Lynneker as a clerk in the City and County Bank. His fiancée, Miss Sybil Groome, was a young lady of good family. Lady Constance Olivier was a sister of Lord Wansford's.

Then, too, there was a great deal of talk about the sudden access to fortune of Dr Weatherley, the head master of the King's School, whose uncle had died and left him, quite unexpectedly so it was said, a sum of money variously estimated at from fifty thousand pounds to half a million. Dr Weatherley stayed on at the school until the end of the Christmas term, but his wife and family did not return to Medboro' after the summer holidays.

It was in this August, too, that Mrs Dickinson, the wife of the builder, made the famous scene in the market-place. Every one knew that she drank, but she had until this occasion concealed her weakness in the privacy of her own home. In public she always wore a thick veil to conceal the disastrous effects that over-indulgence was having upon her complexion. But on that Wednesday afternoon—it was cattle-market day, and even at half-past three the Square was full of people—she appeared not only without a veil, but also without a hat. Mr Hewitt, the grocer, was the first person to recognise her, and he ran out of his shop and tried to persuade her to ‘come in and rest for a bit out of the heat’; where-upon to his immense distress she turned upon him, accused him of being in league with her husband, and began to scream for help. There was a crowd round them at once, a crowd that contained a large number of cattle-drovers, some of them market-merry, and all of them quite ready for a little innocent amusement. Mr Hewitt was heroic, and stood his ground, still attempting to persuade the shrieking Mrs Dickinson into the asylum of his shop, in face of the ribald comments of the drovers, who strongly supported the presumed grievances of the lady. Even if it had ended there, the scandal would have been a remarkable one, but worse was to follow. For, when assistance arrived—Mr Bell from the Bank, and Atcherley, the saddler from the top of Narrow Street, were Mr Hewitt’s first allies—Mrs Dickinson threw herself on the ground, denounced them all for plotting to get her ‘put away,’ and dared them do their worst. They had to take her to the police-station in the end. A dreadful business altogether.

Certainly Medboro’ had enough distractions that August to turn its attention from the reputed wickedness of Mrs Kirkwood and the Cathedral organist.

4

Stephen did not return to the King's School after the summer holidays. He would have shrunk from the idea of going back in any case. He knew that the truth about his mother must be known sooner or later; and foresaw that in those circumstances fellows like the Halls could not be expected to show any delicacy of feeling. They would make unpleasant allusions, and then pretend to apologise. But that difficulty was solved for him by the prompt action of Mr Dickinson.

He called at the shop one morning, about a week after his wife's disgraceful exhibition in the market-place, and made inquiry from Mr Kirkwood for 'that lad of yours.'

Little Kirkwood, who then, and for more than twelve months afterwards, was perfectly sane and practical as long as the subject before him did not involve his great delusion, replied that Stephen was upstairs.

'I want him to come into my office,' Mr Dickinson bluntly announced.

'He has mentioned it to me,' little Kirkwood said, rubbing his hands and brooding wistfully.

'Does he want to come?' Dickinson asked.

'I believe he does,' the bookseller replied.

'Have you any objection?'

Mr Kirkwood continued to rub his hands with an air of deep contemplation.

He was flattered by the builder's attention. Despite the unfortunate marriage which had interfered with his social relations, James Dickinson was well respected in the town. He, like old Spentwater, the timber-merchant, represented an industry that added to the collective wealth of the place. They made money outside Medboro' and brought it into the town—mainly through the employment of local labour. For, although Medboro'

was the site of Dickinson's workshops and offices, he was only incidentally a local contractor. All his big jobs had been outside. He had done important work in London, Leicester, and Bedford, for example, to say nothing of the new school buildings at Oakstone, upon which over £80,000 had been spent in the past ten years.

'I had wanted Stephen to go in for literature,' little Kirkwood said apologetically, 'but Mr Sercombe seems to think he has no particular talent that way. I'm not sure whether his mother . . .' He paused, with a sudden air of changing the subject, and then went on, 'She's away just now, staying with her friend Miss Bellew, the singer, in London.'

Dickinson's eyes narrowed. He knew more than the town did about that affair, and he had a fellow-feeling for the bookseller; but he also had a shrewd suspicion that this was not an appropriate occasion for any expression of sympathy.

'Well, if you've no objection, I'll go up and see the lad myself,' he broke in, ignoring the diversion.

'Very pleased, I'm sure,' Mr Kirkwood mumbled, and led the way upstairs.

They found Stephen in the sitting-room, reading a second-hand copy of Gwilt's *Encyclopædia of Architecture*, borrowed from the shop. He jumped up when his father and Dickinson came in.

'Here's Mr Dickinson come to see you, Stephen,' little Kirkwood announced, 'about your going into his office.'

Stephen blushed and could find no suitable answer. He was a trifle overwhelmed at the honour that was being done to him.

'I happened to be passing,' Dickinson said, 'and thought I'd just look in and see if you and your father had made up your minds yet.'

'I should like to come, sir,' Stephen said. 'And I don't think father has any objection now.'

'Been reading Gwilt, eh?' Dickinson commented, with a glance at the squat, thick volume on the table. 'Ah! well, he's a bit out of date. What you've got to learn about now in the building trade is the use of steel. Are you good at figures?'

'Pretty fair, I think, sir,' Stephen said. 'At school I was always better at maths. than classics.'

'Rotten school ours,' remarked the builder with emphasis. 'Oakstone's the place to educate boys for the engineering trades. I've got tips for my own business from the shops I built at Oakstone.'

He was not, physically, a very big man, but he seemed to fill the Kirkwood's little sitting-room as he stood there by the table talking of building and education. He had such an air of resolution and forthrightness, of knowing how things ought to be done, and getting them done without delay.

A thought of Dr Threlfall flitted across Stephen's mind, and by comparison the organist seemed a delicate and rather finicking creature.

'Well, when will you begin?' Dickinson continued. 'I should put you in the office to start with—at sixteen shillings a week. But if you show any aptitude you'll soon get a rise.' He hesitated, frowned, and made a half-apologetic gesture with one of his square, capable hands. 'To be quite frank with you,' he went on, 'I've got a notion of taking some youngster like yourself and bringing him up to the business. My own son, as you know, was . . . My own boy died two years ago last January; and I'm not likely to have another. I shall be fifty-one next month, and, as perhaps you've heard, my wife's gone to an asylum and likely to stay there.'

He gave them no time to mumble their condolences, but went on almost without a break, 'So you see, my lad, I'm giving you a rare chance. It'll depend on yourself what use you make of it. If you show aptitude and

work hard, you'll likely be a rich man one of these days.'

He looked straight at Stephen as he concluded this speech, and Stephen blushed and stammered. 'I'd like to try, sir,' he said.

'Well, you be up at my office at nine sharp on Monday morning, and we'll soon see what you're made of.' Mr Dickinson answered, with a touch of asperity. 'Good-day to you.'

He was downstairs and out into the street before little Kirkwood, hurrying after him, could get in a single word of thanks.

Stephen was greatly flattered, but afraid that he had hardly done himself justice. He had been embarrassed by such an extraordinary mark of favour from so great a man. He could think of no reason why he had been thus singled out. It was so odd, too, that Mr Dickinson should have taken the trouble to come and see him, and have been so outspoken about his private affairs and intentions.

Emily and Hilda, also, dwelt rather unnecessarily on this aspect of the offer when the great announcement was made to them. Hilda even went so far as to wonder whether Mr Dickinson's domestic troubles had been too much for him—she was, naturally, somewhat biased about this time by their own experiences. But indeed none of them was the least likely to guess the truth, since they were all ignorant both of a certain fact in James Dickinson's life, and also of a certain trait in his character.

The fact in question was that his son, a boy of thirteen, had, in effect, been killed by his mother's neglect. He had scarlet fever, was slightly delirious, and she was supposed to be nursing him. She had been steadily sober, then, for nearly two months; and her husband had trusted her. She was not less devoted to the boy than

he was himself, and it seemed to the last degree improbable that she would break out again just at this crisis. Yet that was what she did; and she was sound asleep and helpless in her chair when young Dickinson got out of bed in the middle of the January night and leaned out of the window to cool himself. His father found him there, and only his two parents knew the real cause of the boy's death. That Mrs Dickinson was hardly ever sober after this tragedy is not, perhaps, a cause for astonishment.

The trait in James Dickinson's character was simply a longing for some expression of his defeated fatherhood. He chose to experiment with Stephen, firstly because he liked the look of him, and secondly because, as in the case of his own son, Stephen had, in Dickinson's opinion, been unfortunate in his mother.

5

So it came about that in the course of the next seven years Stephen was given opportunity to study the mysteries of the building trade in all its branches. He began in what was known as the Works Office, two miles out of the town; the works being conveniently situated to straddle a siding of the Great Northern Railway, and within a quarter of a mile of 'The New Stretton Brickfields,' of which company James Dickinson was a director and the principal shareholder.

Here Stephen began his business career as a junior estimating clerk, the reason given him for this method of inauguration being, in the words of his employer, that 'building begins with prices and ends with 'em. You start a job with the estimate for your tender and finish it with the bill of extras and omissions. So you can't do better than get a grounding in prices on paper

to start with. And don't forget that it's only a grounding. You'll have to go on keeping in touch with prices for the rest of your natural life. I'm learning something new in that way every day.'

Nevertheless, Stephen never became an expert in this essential branch of knowledge. He had a reliable memory, and a good head for figures, but the subject of prices never really interested him; whereas the problems of construction fascinated him from the outset. Also he became in time a competent judge of materials. His real appreciation of the trade he had adopted began when, after two years of conscientious struggling with the strange intricacies of estimating, Mr Dickinson decided to give him further practical experience by 'putting him through the shops.'

Stephen was looking a trifle peaked just then. Two years of indoor clerical work had begun to tell on him. Also his father had died some three weeks before, and he had been involved in a host of minor worries and perplexities. His three years in the shops made a new man of him, broadened his shoulders, cured a slight tendency to anæmia that had shown itself as a result of his indoor life, and generally quickened his vitality.

Incidentally, the move from office to shops marked a change in Stephen's relations to his employer. Up to that time he had received no special mark of favour. He had had his wages raised from sixteen to twenty-two shillings a week, but, judged by the standard of his colleagues' earnings, the latter figure was not excessive for the work he was doing. Moreover, both inside the office and out, Mr Dickinson treated Stephen precisely as he treated his other employees of the same grade; and he had made no further reference to the large promises he had originally indicated. Indeed, when Stephen received a message from one of the senior clerks that he was wanted by the boss up at the town office,

he had a horrible suspicion that he might be going to get the sack!

The opening of the conversation between him and his master did not immediately relieve this anxiety.

Mr Dickinson began by asking Stephen if he were satisfied with the manner in which he was doing his work.

'I do my best, sir,' Stephen said. 'I can't say that I find the work very interesting.'

'Think you'd like to give it up?' Mr Dickinson inquired, looking down at the papers on the desk in front of him.

'Oh! no, sir,' Stephen ejaculated.

'I mean the office-work, for the time being. Go into the shops,' his employer explained.

'Yes, sir. I should like that,' Stephen agreed readily.

'Well, I'm putting you on to that next week,' Mr Dickinson said. He pushed the papers away from him and looked up as he continued. 'You'll not be earning your wages there, you know. You wouldn't be worth fivepence an hour in the carpenters' yard.' He was watching Stephen's expression with a keen, steady stare; and waited now for him to comment on this last indisputable statement.

'Then I think I'd better stick to the estimating, sir,' Stephen said. 'My father didn't leave much, and my sister, the youngest one that is, is only getting twelve shillings a week. It's a bit tight all round.'

His employer made no comment on this announcement. 'I've been keeping an eye on you, my lad,' he went on, 'although you mayn't have been aware of it, and I think you'll shape when you've had a bit more experience. Well, I made you some kind of a promise two years back, but I've just been waiting to see what you're made of. Now, what it comes to is this, that I'm going to apprentice you to the trade and take the risk of whether you'll

be any good to me in say, five years time. In the meanwhile, I shall allow you three pounds a week; and you must understand that you'll get no advance on that until your five years is up—unless you can prove to me that you're worth more.'

Stephen began to stammer his thanks, but Mr Dickinson interrupted him.

'How d'you get on with the other chaps in the office?' he asked.

'Fairly well, sir,' Stephen replied.

'Find 'em a bit rough sometimes?'

'A bit, sir.'

'You'll find 'em rougher in the shops.'

'I can put up with that, sir.'

'Ay, no doubt you can,' returned Mr Dickinson; 'but there maybe more in it than you think all the same. With these other chaps in the office you've been working on a level, and I've taken good care as they shouldn't have any reason to be jealous of you. Now you've got a big lift, my lad, and they'll all know about it; and you mustn't expect to find yourself exactly popular. You'll not be joining any of the unions for instance. You'll be the young gent come to learn the trade, and they'll be suspicious of you; accuse you of spyin' on 'em as likely as not, and a lot of other damn foolishness.' His regard of Stephen had a hint of tenderness as he added, 'Can you stick it, my lad?'

'What else can I do, sir?' Stephen replied.

'Ah! but do you want to stick it?' Mr Dickinson asked. 'Are you keen enough on the job to put up with a lot of unpleasantness so as you may learn it? I don't mean because you want to get on and make money, but because you're interested in building.'

'Yes, sir. I am very interested in building—on the constructional side,' Stephen said.

Mr Dickinson smiled. 'You don't mean me to forget

that,' he said. 'Well, so long as I'm here to look after the other side, it'll suit me well enough to train you in construction. But just bear in mind what I told you here two years ago, that it's prices as is the backbone of the trade.'

As Stephen was going, Mr Dickinson got up and laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. 'You'll do me credit, yet,' he said with a kind smile.

Stephen had not known such a feeling of elation since his great score in the Town match; and this time there was no horrible interference with his triumph. His sisters each in her own manner glowed over him when he told them his great news; Hilda making romantic plans for his future, and Emily regarding him with an intent stare of brooding admiration. Their only regret was that 'poor father couldn't know.'

Little Kirkwood, the martyr, had already been canonised by his children.

Nevertheless, some effect of association brought memories of his mother rather than of his father to Stephen that night. Intellectually his judgment of her had not changed in those two years. He still believed that she had deceived and hoaxed them all; that she had never loved them and had lived always and only for her own pleasure and satisfaction. But he was beginning to frame the ghost of an excuse for her, and in doing it he found himself wondering with a little pang of longing whether she ever thought of him? He knew that Dr Threlfall had been successful with his light music, and also that his mother had made more than one appearance on the London stage as a raconteuse. Stephen supposed that they would get married now that his father was dead—if they ever heard of his death. . . .

And just as he was going to sleep he had a sudden vision of little Margaret Weatherley. Her face appeared quite clearly before him, wearing the same bewildering

smile with which she had beckoned him the last time he had seen her.

It seemed as if there was some subtle unanalysable relation in Stephen's mind between his mother and Margaret Weatherley. He was inclined to think of them as representing his evil and his good angels. He had dreamed of them, perhaps, half a dozen times in the past two years; and once Margaret had come to him with welcoming arms, and as he had rapturously gone to meet her he had realised with a faint disappointment that he was embracing his mother.

6

Mr Dickinson's forecast of the general attitude that Stephen might expect from the workmen in the shops proved to be fairly accurate. The favoured apprentice, neither gentleman nor workman, was looked upon with suspicion and dislike. He represented the potential employer, while in each department of the crafts through which he travelled he began as the inferior in knowledge of the least skilled workman. Also, he had an unfair advantage over them. He came to learn, but not to acquire that skill in the craft which can only be gained by long years of experience. When he came out of the carpenters' yard, for instance, he had a practical understanding of the detail and methods of joinery, but he could not, with his own hands, have performed the simplest operations to the satisfaction of the foreman. And naturally his fellow-workers made the most of their obvious superiority. Some of them were more kindly than others in their treatment of him, but on the whole, Stephen was very effectively bullied at the works. In time, he learnt to stand up for himself. Before his three years were up he had had more than one fight with

youngsters somewhere about his own age. But there were moments in the first twelve months of his apprenticeship when he wondered whether, in Dickinson's phrase, he would be able to stick it.

And it was still a relief to him when nearly at the end of his time he was sent up to Middlesborough for three months' experience of the steel trade in its application to building. He was frankly a visitor there, permitted the free run of the offices and works by the courtesy of the firm, extended to their old friend and good customer, James Dickinson.

When Stephen returned from the North, he had no idea what was to be the next phase of his apprenticeship, which had still two years to run. He was only twenty-two then, but in many ways he was old for his age. He had gained immensely in knowledge, in self-confidence, and in physical development since he had left school. He had had to face the coarseness of life, and it had long since ceased to shock him, although it had failed to blunt the fine edge of his personal fastidiousness in matters appertaining to sex. In that relation he made what was fundamentally a false distinction, by ranging women into classes. In one class, still supreme and unsubstantial as a fairy princess, was his ideal of Margaret Weatherley. In another, all the respectable women of his acquaintance from Lady Constance Olivier down to his own sisters. All the women in this group were from Stephen's viewpoint practically sexless. In the lowest group were the girls, work-girls for the most part, who permitted 'liberties.' They were 'fair game' according to the ethic he had learnt from his fellow-workmen; although Stephen himself had not as yet figured in the rôle of the hunter. His personal fastidiousness had saved him from that, so far. . . .

Any doubt as to the next course in his training was resolved by Mr Dickinson on the first evening of Stephen's

return from Middlesborough. His employer met him at the Great Northern Station and took him up to supper at the house in Lincoln Road—still kept on, although there was no kin of James Dickinson's to share his splendour.

Stephen was to go as clerk of the works to a new job at Leicester, already begun to the extent that the house-breakers had started to clear the site. He was to spend a fortnight at Medboro' studying the bill of quantities, the plans, and specifications, the framings and other preparations that were already in hand at the works—all under the directing advice and personal supervision of his chief.

'It'll be a good job for you to start on,' was Mr Dickinson's summary. 'Technical schools; the contract's for £28,000, and the architect is Owen Bradley, whose name'll be familiar to you. He's a hard man to deal with, but he knows his work, and there'll be no misunderstandings. I remember his winning the Birchester Offices competition. Wilcoxes were the contractors, and though that was Mr Bradley's first job in private practice, George Wilcox told me that they made precious little profit out of it. Bradley was a hard man of business, he said. That was in '88, twenty years ago. I've never done a job for him before, but I want to keep in with him. He's a warm man is Mr Bradley.'

Stephen was elated but a little nervous. He did not underestimate the responsibilities of a builder's clerk of works.

He was to have another pound a week to cover the expenses of living away from home, and it seemed to him quite a magnificent salary, as he had now no outside drain on his resources. Emily was keeping herself, earning £120 a year as third mistress at the Council School; and Hilda had married a widower of forty, George Cummin, the chemist in Priestgate. He had

once been in financial difficulties, but had pulled his business round and was now one of the town's respected citizens. A stupid, reliable sort of man, in Stephen's opinion. He could not imagine what Hilda had seen in Mr Cummin to tempt her to marry him.

7

It was in Leicester that Stephen first approached and then somewhat abruptly retreated from the snare of sex.

She was a fair, rather too plump woman of twenty-eight, passing as a widow, with one little girl of nine years old, and she was the attendant at one of the principal lending libraries in the town.

Stephen had been brought up in an atmosphere of books, and he continued to read anything that came in his way, almost by habit. When he found himself set down in Leicester for at least twelve months, without the possibility of access to the store which his father's successor, Henry Walker, had always allowed him to draw upon, Stephen decided at once that his income permitted him to take out a subscription to a lending library. And he happened to choose the one in which Bessie Ward served as an assistant.

She 'fancied' Stephen from the first moment she set eyes on him. She liked men to be dark and rather tall, with a brusque, slightly arrogant manner that was probably assumed to hide the grave tenderness expressed by dark blue eyes. Also, she found Stephen's youth and his air of inexperience in speaking to women particularly attractive.

Stephen, on his side, was tempted by her relative maturity, by the way the pretty fair hair grew on her

forehead, by the lines of her mouth, and most definitely by her obvious approval of him.

She talked to him with ease and fluency when he came to open his subscription, and choose his first book. She had an almost scholarly knowledge of the works of the modern novelists, although she was clever enough to reserve her judgment upon them until she had gathered the trend of the young man's own tastes. She had sized him up from the outset as being 'clever.' His hands still bore the disfigurements of his work in the shops, but she was sure that he 'wasn't a bit common.' She guessed that he might be an engineer.

The second time he went to the library the place was full of other subscribers, but just as he was leaving she managed to give him a broad hint of her preference for his society.

'I'm sorry I'm so busy this evening, Mr Kirkwood,' she said in an undertone, as she entered the title of his book; 'the morning before twelve's my free-est time. But, perhaps, you can't get away then?'

'Oh! thanks. I'll remember that,' was all Stephen could find to say, but he reflected on the implications of her speech when he was back at his lodgings; and found them pleasantly exciting. She had remembered his name, and had told him in so many words that she wanted to have the opportunity of talking with him alone. The site of the New Technical Schools was only a quarter of a mile from the library, and he decided that he would find time to run up one morning about eleven.

When he went at last, after putting off the adventure for the best part of a week from sheer nervousness, he went in a spirit of bravado, trying very hard to be a man of the world and quaking inwardly. This woman would not fit into any of his categories. She could not be classed as a 'girl' in the sense in which he used the word; nor, on the other hand, could he fit her

imaginatively into that immense group that held the Bishop's wife and his own sisters. She appeared in fact to need a special class all to herself, and gained prestige in his estimation accordingly. She had come out of the vague background of his generalisations, and was posed clearly, even dangerously, before him as an individual and rather attractive woman.

He found her alone at the library, but he did not stay long, and their conversation was exclusively about his choice of another book, and free from innuendo, although the subject bristled with opportunities. She refrained because she was afraid of scaring him.

Nevertheless Stephen knew perfectly well that this new acquaintanceship might, if he wished it, ripen into an adventure; and the thought curiously made him tremble. He would approach the idea of possible eventualities in imagination, and then hastily put them out of his mind with something like terror. And a few hours later he would be laughing at himself and girding himself on to greater liberties of speculation.

It was during one of these reactions that he went to the library for the fourth time, again in the morning. And it was on this occasion that, while she was stretching out her left hand to take a book down for him, he noticed for the first time that she wore a wedding ring. The sight of it gave him courage. For a moment Bessie Ward was merged again into the annihilating class of married women.

'Are you married?' he asked simply.

She looked down at her ring and nodded. 'Worse luck,' she murmured.

'Why? Isn't he—don't you get on?' Stephen asked.

'Haven't seen him for nearly four years,' she said, still modestly downcast. 'He was in America last time I heard of him, about ten months ago.' She lowered her

voice still further as she added, 'I pretend I'm a widow here.'

Stephen did not know what to say. The frankness of her admission had a significance that he had instantly realised. She had, he felt, practically confessed that she belonged to that group the members of which were 'fair game.' He looked down at her fair hair and the rather too bountiful curves of her figure, and wondered if he wanted to embrace her. He rather thought not; but he wasn't at all sure.

'Do you ever go to the cinemas?' he asked suddenly.

'Sometimes; when I can get any one to take me,' she replied, clinching his advance.

Stephen found that his knees were trembling. It was in a spasm of disgust with his own weakness that he continued, 'Have you got anything to do to-night? Would you care to come with me?'

They made an appointment at the 'Royal Cinema Theatre' for half-past eight, and Stephen stalked out of the shop fully determined to be a man. From first to last, Bessie had behaved with a modesty that was far more suggestive than any boldness. She had implied so unmistakably that Stephen was making love to her, and that she was his timorous but willing victim.

As he sat over his supper, Stephen was engaged in a tremendous battle with his nervousness. Once or twice he was on the verge of deciding to break the engagement. He kept it in the end, not out of any consideration for Bessie Ward, but because he was ashamed of his own hesitations. He tried to stimulate his virility by recalling various conversations he had heard in the 'shops.'

And during the performance at the Cinema Theatre he was still occupied with his own immense internal conflict rather than with the attractions of his companion. When she pressed her plump shoulder against him in the

darkness of the auditorium he responded with an answering pressure, solely to convince himself how bold he could be.

In 1908 the exhibitions at the 'picture palaces' did not consist as they do now of one long 'drama' that constitutes the whole performance, but of a series of short films lasting from ten minutes to half an hour, each of which presented a story; the comic and romantic usually alternating. The audience came and went as it suited them; and Stephen and Bessie Ward had not been in the place an hour when she suggested that they had had enough for one evening.

'Just as you like,' Stephen agreed. 'Do you want to go home now?' He was surprised that she should want to go so soon.

'It isn't far,' she said. 'We can get there on the tram in ten minutes.' The lights were up between two items of the programme, and she looked up at him with the same air of modest compliance with his wishes that she had worn in the library.

Stephen had not imagined that they would go so far that evening, but he tried to hide the spasm of disconcertion that attacked him.

'All right,' he said brusquely. 'Come along before the lights go down.'

It was in the tram that he definitely made up his mind to 'go through with it.'

He affected a gallant air of willingness when she asked him at the door of her little house whether he wouldn't come in and have a cup of cocoa; but he felt cold and sick and horribly nervous.

And the consciousness that the whole affair was in some unrealisable way completely wrong and impossible grew steadily as she prepared the cocoa she had promised him. The more closely he looked at her the less did he feel stimulated to make love to her. He was no longer

flattered by her preference for him but rather repelled. Deep down in his being, some part of him was striving desperately not to recognise a likeness between Bessie Ward's choice of himself, and his mother's submission to Christopher Threlfall.

Nevertheless, he was still goading himself on to go through with it. He had a feeling that to shirk was in some way a denial of his manhood. . . .

Bessie, meanwhile, was striving to overcome what she believed to be nothing more than the natural shyness of youth. She made him sit beside her on the uncomfortable sofa while he sipped his cocoa, and tried to draw him out about his own affairs; what he was doing, where he came from, how long he was going to stay in Leicester.

He grasped at that opportunity to postpone making love to her. As a companion she appealed to him, and if she had taken less for granted and been content to wait until their friendship slowly ripened, the outcome might have been other than it actually was. But Bessie Ward's experience of men, though fairly extensive, had been limited in kind. After a few minutes devoted to this kind of conversation, she began to practise her little arts of allurements.

'I fancied you the first time I saw you,' she said presently, and snuggled a little nearer to him.

Stephen could see but three replies to this advance: to put his arm round her, to hold her hand, or to sit with his arm wedged to his side, feeling, and no doubt looking, a fool. He chose the first. How extraordinarily solid she was! She was wearing a brown dress of some rough material, and it came into his mind that embracing her was like hugging a well-filled sack. So far as the effect upon his feelings was concerned, the sack would have done equally well.

She looked up at him archly.

There was no retreat now for a man of honour. He kissed her—respectfully.

She laughed at his deliberation. 'You *are* a funny boy,' she chided him. 'One might think I was your mother. I'm not quite old enough for that, you know. I'm only just twenty-eight.'

That reference used as a simile finished Stephen. The obscure resistance that he had been fighting to overcome was no longer a physical inertia; it had become a positive impulse.

He shuddered, withdrew his arm, and stood up.

'I'm sorry. I—I'm . . . a bit off colour to-night,' he stammered. 'Do you mind if I go now?'

No liberty he might have attempted would have produced such a blush on Bessie Ward's face as did this abrupt rejection of her advances. She was suddenly hurt and embarrassed. 'I'm sure I don't want you to stop, if you don't—if you're not well,' she replied, saving her retort from bitterness at the last moment.

'I expect I've been smoking too much or something,' he apologised. He didn't want to offend her. He did not despise her for having made advances to him. But he felt an overpowering desire to get away from her.

His excuse was not ill-chosen. By the white light of the incandescent gas-mantle, Bessie could see that his face was bloodless under his sunburn.

'Don't feel faint, do you?' she asked anxiously.

'A bit,' Stephen replied. 'I'll be all right when I get outside. Don't you come to the door.' His way of escape lay immediately open before him now; and he snatched up his hat and rushed out of the house with the intent haste of a man who expects to be immediately sick.

Bessie, no doubt, composed a variety of amusing comments on his behaviour after he had gone; but she never had a chance to deliver them. Stephen could not

face her again. After that incident, he sent a messenger from the works to change his book for him; and when his three months subscription was up he changed his library.

He saw her once in the street, some five months later. She was leaning affectionately on the arm of a tall dark man who was obviously not averse to her society. Stephen had quite recovered from his revulsion of feeling by then, and cursed himself for having been such a fool. He wondered why he had not taken advantage of such an attractive opportunity when it had been offered to him.

8

He stayed in Leicester for nearly ten months, and was then transferred to take charge of a new job just beginning in Northampton. His move was by way of being a mark of Mr Dickinson's approval. His praise of Stephen was something indirect, but he implied that any one could now look after the technical schools, supervised as they were by so reliable and painstaking an architect as Owen Bradley, whereas the design for the Northampton job—a boot factory—was by a comparatively young and inexperienced man, and might lead to all sorts of disasters if it were not carefully watched.

Stephen was glad of the change, although the towns of Leicester and Northampton are rather similar in type, as though the spirit of bootmaking had managed to express itself in the material body of the buildings. He was not, however, destined to stay long in Northampton, for in the following November he was recalled to Medboro' to work on a tender that was to be sent in for a £150,000 job in London, a building for which Bradley was again the architect.

'I think we're going to get it,' Mr Dickinson explained. 'Mr Bradley was pleased with our work in Leicester, and mentioned you to me as a promising youngster—said you were more intelligent than the ordinary builder's clerk of works. And if we get this contract, I shall send you up to London to see the job right through—it'll take two years. Anyway, it'll be as well for you to get the work well into your head from the very start. You'd better go up to town and take a day at the drawings in Mr Bradley's office, as soon as you've studied the bill of quantities.' He paused and looked at Stephen with a friendly smile as he continued, 'Feel as if you're getting on, eh?'

'Are you satisfied with me, sir?' Stephen asked. 'Do you think you can trust me to look after a big job like this?'

'Well, you haven't done so badly for a beginner,' Mr Dickinson said, stroking his neat little pointed gray beard. 'Let's see; your seven years won't be up till next September.'

'No, sir.'

'But you'll need more than four pounds a week if we get this job o' Bradley's. Anyway, you can draw on me for three hundred a year as from the beginning of next January. And when you've carried this job through, if we get it, we can talk of a new arrangement. I think I can find a use for you.'

'I don't know how to thank you, sir,' Stephen said, his face bright with emotion. It was not every young man of twenty-three—he would not be twenty-four until the following February—who was earning £300 a year, with the prospect of some highly attractive new 'arrangement' at the end of another two years. He could only infer from his chief's slightly quizzical manner that the new arrangement would mean a considerable rise.

'Thank yourself,' Mr Dickinson said. 'You've got

three qualities to be proud of. You're intelligent, you're trustworthy, and you're reasonably diligent. They're the qualities I was looking for, and I'm inclined to congratulate myself on having picked you out at the first shot. I wasn't looking for geniuses; though one or two of your suggestions about that factory at Northampton were pretty smart for a youngster.'

After that conversation, Stephen began to take himself more seriously. He felt that he was, in a sense, a made man already, and that the future might hold many dignities for him. He might one day, for example, be Mayor of Medboro'!

Eighteen months experience as a clerk of the works had stiffened his manner and given him confidence. In the Stretton office, one or two of the estimating clerks who had given him his orders when he first came there, told each other that young Kirkwood was 'getting too cocky.' But no hint of this opinion reached Stephen himself. It was common talk among the employees of the firm now, that he might be a partner in the near future.

And when James Dickinson's tender was accepted for the big London job, there was a paragraph in the Medboro' *Advertiser* which, after paying the conventional compliments to Mr Dickinson's success, went on to mention the fact that Mr Stephen Kirkwood was to have the supervision of the work, and to congratulate him on the appointment.

'You *are* getting on,' Hilda said, when she next met her brother after this paragraph appeared. 'Quite a public man you'll be soon.'

'Not so bad,' agreed Stephen with a grin.

'You'll be too proud to know us when you come back from London,' Hilda continued.

'Got nothing to be proud about,' Stephen said. 'It's just luck and Mr Dickinson's kindness.'

He wondered sometimes whether he should meet Hall secundus in London. He had been on the staff of some paper in Fleet Street for the past three or four years; and of all the boys Stephen had known at the King's School, Hall was the only one to whom he would have liked to boast of his success. Young Hall had always been inclined to put on airs of superiority. Moreover, Stephen still nourished a grudge against him for his disloyalty in the matter of Margaret Weatherley's smile.

Perhaps *she* was living in London too, but he never dreamed of her now; very rarely thought of her. And since he had come back from Northampton, he had been engaged in a tentative flirtation with his cousin, Phyllis Bell. She was a tall, rather fair girl of twenty-one, with good features that, in repose, were almost beautiful. Unfortunately, she spoilt her effect when she talked or laughed. Her mouth had a tendency to writhe when she became the least animated, producing in some indefinable way an impression of vulgarity.

It was this defect that saved Stephen from proposing to her, the evening before he went to town to take over his new work. Mrs Bell had never favoured any sort of intimacy between her two girls and their three cousins in Long Causeway. She had often secretly deplored the relationship as imposing an additional and annoying obstacle between her and the attainment of her important social ambitions. But now that her brother was dead, and Stephen likely to become an important person in the life of the town, she had not opposed his flirtation with Phyllis. She had heard good reports of him from the influential and trusted Adam Neale, who had two years before been taken into partnership by Mr Folliott. Neale had spoken of Stephen as a 'likely' young man, and hinted that, as James Dickinson's protégé, he would eventually occupy an important position in the town. He further ventured the opinion that Stephen had his

head screwed on the right way. After that judgment, Mrs Bell had finally overcome her natural reluctance to encourage the son of Andrew and Cecilia Kirkwood, and had persuaded herself that, after all, 'Phyllis might do worse.' She even went the length of leaving her elder daughter and Stephen alone together in the drawing-room, when he came to say good-bye to them on the night before he went to town.

Unhappily for the success of her scheme, Phyllis, who was quite unaware of her defect, happened to be in an unusually lively mood that night; and Stephen, who had had a vague idea that he might propose to her that evening, found his cousin's writhing mouth a justifiable excuse for postponing his declaration. When she was quiet and apparently thoughtful, he admired her immensely. But as he watched her on this occasion, he realised quite definitely that he had no desire to be mated with her for the rest of his life. He would have liked to kiss her, sacramentally, if she would keep still; but he would not like to be always confronted by that expression which so strangely dropped her into the category of the girls who were 'fair game.' He remembered seeing factory girls in Leicester and Northampton who had had just that same uncontrolled twist of the mouth when they laughed.

Chapter Four

I

Stephen took a room in Camberwell on the recommendation of the works foreman, who 'knew' London, having been employed there on two previous jobs. Stephen himself could only boast the slightest acquaintance with London. He had visited it five times altogether, in the course of his life; but as each visit had only presented the experience of a day's excursion, his knowledge was confined to such places of interest as the Tower, Madame Tussaud's, Earl's Court, the White City, St Paul's, the British Museum, the Albert and Queen's Halls, the Monument, the Coliseum, and other centres of amusement. To all of these he had gone at some time or another between the ages of nine and seventeen in company with his mother. The memory of her was his one pervading association with these experiences; but about this focus were arranged an endless series of bright little pictures: of Emily staring enormously at the British Museum, of Hilda yawning and looking about her at a Queen's Hall concert, of his father very intent on a bill of fare ordering supper at a big restaurant just opposite King's Cross station. Of Camberwell he knew nothing except that the name was in some way a joke connected with a comic song he had heard Albert Chevalier sing on the one occasion on which he had visited Medboro'. It had been an old song then, but had been given 'by request.'

Stephen's attitude towards London as a whole was, at the outset, typically provincial. He was both awed

and critical. The size of the place, the mass of the buildings, the traffic, and the vast indifference of the enormous population made him feel small, strange, and insignificant; and as a relief from the oppression begotten by his sense of inferiority he sought to criticise London in those immediate details which were most closely presented to him. He could begin with the eggs served for his breakfast, and mark a distinct point in favour of Medboro'; ending perhaps with generalisations about Camberwell and the district between it and his work on the Embankment, that revealed London south of the Thames as lacking a dozen graces and virtues possessed by his native city.

But within a month he had settled down to the common differentiation between just that district which became almost tediously familiar to him in his daily routine, and the entire remainder of the immensity. The first became to him a kind of home, his own by reason of his intimate knowledge of it. From that centre he set out to explore, at first timidly, and with a sense of daring, the great, intimidating remainder that seemed to have no limit to its perplexing extensions.

In these Saturday afternoon and Sunday explorations, he began by taking as his object some one or more of those dimly remembered places associated with his excursions from Medboro'; and having rediscovered such goals as the Tower, the Albert Hall, or the British Museum, he mentally related them to the now familiar country of his daily experience. Afterwards he saw in his mind's eye a map of the main arteries, and so adding a little piece here and there to his general conception of the place as a collection of districts about a centre, he arrived within three months or so at just such a general idea of the whole as is common to the average Londoner—the difference between each picture depending only

upon the point of view, namely the residential district of the observer.

In the course of this process, London exhibited a marked tendency to shrink, although an occasional new discovery such as Hampstead Heath or the Mile End Road would for a time mysteriously distend it again.

It was not until Stephen had thus taken the more obvious opportunities for discovery afforded by London that he began to feel lonely.

At first his loneliness only obtruded itself on Sunday. On week-days he was too fully occupied. He reached the Embankment every morning at eight o'clock and often stayed there until eight o'clock in the evening. And throughout those twelve hours his attention was almost completely absorbed by his work. By the time he had got home and had had supper he was ready to go to bed. But presently he began to be aware of his loneliness at odd moments even in the busy hours.

There was, for example, a morning in mid-April, when he had been in town just over ten weeks. He had gone up to the man in charge of the derrick engine, and, from the staging of the gaunt straddling tripod, Stephen looked down over the Thames and the valley of South London to the swell of the Surrey hills. The morning was clear and windy, blowing up for rain, and through the tattered banner of driven smoke he could see a bright plan in relief of endlessly repeated roofs, rank after rank and tier after tier, dwindling into the vague blue masses of the distance. He could pick out some of the districts with which he was more familiar; Camberwell and Kennington were pegged out for him by their church spires; Denmark Hill in the distance was recognisably green; and here and there a factory, a council school, a gas works, or a relatively open space marked the map with its distinctive signature.

Stephen's first reaction to that prospect was a feeling

of thankfulness that they had got in the great concrete raft which was the foundation of the whole building, during the relatively dry weather in March. His second, a sense of wonder at the amazing proliferation of houses stretched out below him. What were all those people down there living for? The overwhelming majority of them probably ended as their parents had ended before them. They struggled and prospered, or failed, for fifty, sixty, or seventy years, and then departed, leaving no mark on their generation; at best bequeathing their habits and opinions to children who would carry on the eternal succession.

And from that he came to a consideration of his own ambitions, and could find no pleasure in the thought of them. There was no one to care whether he failed or succeeded, and he passionately wanted some one to care. Emily and Hilda would no doubt care in a way, but the thought of their admiration brought him little comfort. He wanted some one all his own, to whom he would be the essential person in life; some one for whom he in his turn could work, whom he could make happy. Then later there would be his children to live and work for. He would like to have children of his own, several children, and they should have opportunities that had been denied to him. He could find satisfaction in making money if he could spend it on making his wife and children happy.

He turned to find the engineer beside him on the staging.

'Blowing up for wet,' the engineer remarked, and spat heedlessly from the vast height of the derrick down into the remote cavern of the excavation out of which the swarms of workmen were laboriously raising the great erection of the new building. His spittle drifted down into invisibility long before it had reached its casual goal.

'Are you married?' asked Stephen suddenly.

'Ah ! married this twenty year,' the engineer replied.

'Any children?'

'A round half-dozen,' the engineer said. 'Me eldest boy's down there working on the sump, goin' to be a bigger man than his father, so 'e says; but I tell 'im 'e's at the very bottom o' this job and I'm at the top, an' it'll take 'im a long time afore he gets as 'igh as I am.' The engineer laughed with gusto at his own joke, and sent another missile down to fall, for all he cared, on the head of his own son. . . .

As April brightened into May the idea of marriage, both as a remedy for loneliness and a means to justify his existence, presented itself to Stephen with increasing attractiveness. He had once heard some one say to his father that the man who married young had three lives ; the early years of growth and independence, the middle years of responsibility, and then a renewal of independence in old age when his children were grown up. 'But if you don't marry till you're forty or more,' this man had said, 'your children are hanging round your neck till you die.' Stephen remembered that saying now, and it added another to his growing list of reasons for an early marriage. He had more than a hundred pounds put by already, and he was saving another three pounds or more every week in London. The way was clear before him. All that was still necessary was to find a wife.

One Saturday evening in the middle of May he went out to look for one.

The pavements about Camberwell Green and the bottom of the Peckham Road were gay with young women, and Stephen decided that he need not go farther than that in the persecution of his search. He walked up and down and round about and stared with a look of attention at every young woman who might be even remotely possible. He received more than one response

to his stare, but directly a girl smiled at him, he was overcome with shyness and at the same moment seized with an unshakable conviction that this particular young woman would not make at all the kind of wife he desired. He had no ideal clearly before him but he knew or thought he knew what he didn't like.

Then, quite suddenly, his attention was caught by the figure of a woman of twenty-five or so with widely-set steady blue eyes and fair hair. As they met she looked up at him with a calm, appraising stare but made no response to the rather sheepish smile with which he attempted to greet her. When she had passed, he looked back at her, hesitated, and then went home. Something in her expression had sickened him of his method of search. 'No decent girl,' he reflected, 'would pick up a fellow, just meeting him like that in the street.'

When he went out the next morning he had decided that he must somehow or another make the acquaintance of this particular young woman. She had become by her refusal of his tentative advance, a difficult and desirable creature to be sought after and wooed; and the more he thought of her the more convinced he became that she was the ideal wife he sought. He did not see her that Sunday, and afterwards he began to haunt the Green every evening.

He saw her for the second time on the following Wednesday, about seven o'clock, as he was coming home from work. She was looking into the window of a draper's shop, and he stopped a couple of yards away and watched her. He was determined that this time he would not be guilty of that foolish smile. When she turned and saw him watching, he would lift his hat and speak to her. But either she did not see him or, as he guessed to be more probable, preferred to give him no chance of accosting her; for while he waited she turned her back on him and walked away. He did not like to

follow her—to do that would, he felt, give his overtures an air of persecution.

The opportunity to speak to her, when it came at last, had the effect of happy coincidence that the Fates apparently delight in providing when they are not thereby serving our desired ends. For more than a week he had, with no result, spent every evening in looking for her where she was, presumably, most likely to be found; and, then, one Monday afternoon he came upon her by the merest accident in a tea-shop in Holborn.

He had been at Owen Bradley's office in Gray's Inn discussing a proposed substitution in the scantlings of certain rolled steel joists on the fourth floor; and on his way back to the works he felt that he wanted a cup of tea. He turned in to the nearest Lyons, and there sitting alone at a table near the door was his lady of the wide blue eyes.

She looked up at him without alarm or embarrassment, but gave him no kind of invitation to join her.

Stephen raised his hat, blushed, and then summoning all his courage sat down at her table. But, having done that, he dared not look at her, although he felt that she was observing him with the same calm air of self-possession with which she had replied to his first advances. He bent slightly forward over the table, and addressed his opening remarks to the untidy vestiges of some one else's tea.

'Of course you'll think this is just beastly cheek,' he mumbled. 'But it isn't really. I mean, you needn't think I'm just the usual kind of rotter who does this sort of thing.'

Stephen had two manners of speech. The first of them, the one he naturally adopted now, was the result of the King's School influence, very ably reinforced by that of his mother. She had taken great pains with him in this particular, and he had been a fairly apt pupil.

His second manner was a degenerate habit learnt in the shops and in the works, and marked an effort of condescension. He was afraid that the men would think he was putting on side if he talked to them in his other voice.

'What do you want? Why do you want to know me?' she asked calmly.

He dared to look at her then, and found that she was watching him with an expression that was slightly puzzled but by no means resentful.

'I—I wanted to get to know some nice girl, and talk to her,' he said.

'Why?' she asked.

'Well, I'm rather lonely for one thing,' he explained.

'And for another?'

'I—I want to get married,' Stephen blurted out.

She laughed at that, a pleasant, honest laugh of genuine amusement. 'This afternoon?' she suggested. 'Or could you manage to wait till the end of the week?'

Stephen smiled. 'It's so hard to get to know really decent girls,' he said.

'And you thought I looked *really* decent?' she inquired.

Stephen nodded. 'It's frightful cheek, I know,' he admitted.

'And you thought you'd like to marry me?' she persisted.

Stephen blushed. 'I thought I'd like to know you,' he said.

She dropped her tone of persiflage as she replied, 'I'm sorry—for *you*, I mean, if that doesn't sound too conceited—but I'm engaged already. Have been for the last five years. He's been in Canada for nearly four, and I'm going out to him to be married this autumn.'

Stephen realised instantly both the truth of her statement and the unassailability of her decision. She was

the kind of dependable steadfast woman who would be everlastingly faithful to one lover. Also, she was even prettier than he had thought. He was quite convinced now that his choice from every point of view but one had been singularly happy; that if she had not been so unfortunately engaged she would so admirably 'have done.'

His reflections found expression in a simple and sincere aspiration.

'I hope he's a nice man,' he said.

She took him completely into her confidence as she replied, with an equally simple sincerity, 'He is.'

'Oh! well, let's have some tea,' Stephen said, as the waitress at last came to clear the table and take their orders.

After that they talked about Stephen's affairs. She questioned him about his occupation and ambitions, and he confided to her not only the detail of his financial position and prospects, but also the speculations and decisions that had come to him as he viewed south London from the heights of the derrick. They exchanged names and addresses before they parted, and she promised to 'look out for some one' for him, although just then he was convinced, and shyly hinted his conviction, that no one else would do. But it so happened that they never met again.

The queerest thing about that odd encounter is that if she had not been already pledged, she and Stephen would probably have made a perfectly happy marriage. And they both knew it.

The incident, however, barren as it was from one point of view, was not without its influence on Stephen's future, for in a mood of despondency and of reaction against the whole female population of Camberwell, he did not return to his lodgings when he knocked off work that evening; but wandered vaguely down to the 'West

End,' with the idea of going to a theatre. And in his mood of loneliness and desolation, he was precisely in the right frame of mind to respond to the call of a name that he saw displayed on the boards of a theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue.

If the 'CECILIA EDWARDES' who was so prominently advertised had indeed forfeited her right to be worshipped, she was, nevertheless, still his mother.

He went into the theatre less from curiosity than from his imperative need for female companionship.

2

Her performance was a strange and thrilling experience for him. From his seat in the pit he saw her again as a woman of thirty-five, the charming, adorable, perplexing mistress of his early boyhood. The gay tones of her voice, the pretty gestures, the fascinating confiding smile, were all as he so poignantly remembered them before the awful time when the interloper had come to seduce her from her rightful allegiance. Just in that manner, and with just such a whole-hearted endeavour to please, had she told him stories in the old days. It seemed to him that even now she was telling her stories to him alone; as if she were aware of him only, in all that audience, and was trying to win him back to her.

So lost was he in the rapture of this illusion that he was shocked when, as she paused to take her laugh at the end of the story, a man just behind him said in an audible tone. 'She's clever, ain't she? I've 'eard 'er before.'

'Awfully clever. She talks right at you, like, doesn't she?' his companion replied. She could be generous without qualification in her praise of so mature a woman.

Stephen, waking from his fond illusion, found cause

for another if weaker thrill of satisfaction. She was a success, he reflected. She would be happy to-night. She was always so full of life and happiness when she had had a success. He was glad for her, and proud to remember that she was his mother. He wondered whether, if he let his next-door neighbour into this immense confidence, that rather sour-looking individual would be envious or merely sceptical?

He found it immensely exciting to witness this success of his mother's, in the great critical tribunal of a London theatre. At home they were always prepared for her triumphs; and the audience was made up of those familiar, well-disposed people who could only be expected to applaud. She herself had always professed to despise those provincial successes. They excited and pleased her, but she never forgot that they were, as she used to say, 'just local appreciations.'

Did she, now, find some cause for depreciating her London successes, he wondered?

He found that he wanted to know the answer to that question, and he felt that he, before any one else in the world, had a right to know.

Would she speak to him if he went out now and waited for her at the stage door?

Their relations had undergone such a great upheaval in the past ten minutes. For seven years he had been the injured, in a sense, the superior party. Now he would be afraid to speak to her. She was a star of the London theatres, and he was a builder's clerk. Would she be ashamed of him?

Her performance ended with enthusiastic applause. Three times she returned and bowed her acknowledgements, but she would not give the encore that was so vehemently demanded. She shook her head, smiled, and made towards the audience a gesture that mingled entreaty and denial. In imagination Stephen could hear

her voice saying, 'My dear little boy, it's time you went to bed and gave mother a little peace.' He had often been puzzled by that request. He could never understand why she should want him to go away when she so evidently enjoyed entertaining him. And he felt now that all the people in the theatre must be wondering how she could wish to break the liaison that she had so cleverly and delightfully established between her and themselves. They must all be so sorry that she had to leave them; and surely she must be sorry, too. Why should she make that gesture of entreaty, as if she desired release?

Stephen got up and pushed his way out, when the audience had at last accepted his mother's refusal to tell them even one more story. He had not been able to decide whether he dare wait for her at the stage-door, but he knew that he could not remain any longer in the theatre. He fled from the unendurable prospect of watching the successful comedy that was the principal item of the night's entertainment. If he could not see his mother he wanted to be alone to think about the strange revulsion of feeling induced by this unexpected sight of her. In twenty minutes, he had recovered all the emotions that he believed to have been finally destroyed when she had laughed at him in Dr Threlfall's lodgings. He had become a boy again; had once more revived with no consciousness of any difference, the thoughts and emotions he had so easily persuaded himself to be for ever dead and buried. It was as if for seven years some part of him had been numbed and inert, making no response when it was called upon. He was aware of a sense of a new sufficiency and completeness now that he was whole again.

Nevertheless he was afraid to meet her. He might have recovered what he believed at the moment to be his old feeling for her, but he had no certainty that she,

on her part, had retained her feeling for him. She had always been sensitive to the least hint of criticism, and he had utterly condemned her by his long years of silence. In his thought of speaking to her, he saw himself as humbled and suppliant. He had committed an unforgivable offence according to the standards of the old life. And in his present mood these were the only standards he could recognise.

He had come to no decision when he found that he had paused at the stage-door with no distinct remembrance of how he had come there. By the pavement a neat electric brougham was waiting. It might have just set down the young actress who had recently achieved celebrity in the comedy Stephen had refused to watch. But he instantly assumed that the brougham was waiting for his mother; and the inference still further intimidated him. He remembered that he had come on from the works in the rather shabby tweed suit he always wore there, that he had not put on a clean collar that morning, that his hands were rather dirty. He was on the point of turning away, resolved both to think everything over before he dared this experiment, and also, if he came again, to appear more suitably dressed for the occasion, when two young girls passed him coming up the side street from Shaftesbury Avenue. One of them went straight into the theatre by the stage-door, but the other faced round on the threshold and looked earnestly at Stephen. For one instant a nervous, uncertain smile flickered across her face, and then, with an exquisitely familiar little twirl of her skirts, she followed her companion.

Stephen stared after her with a sense of infinite bewilderment. It seemed to him as if by some astounding miracle his life had, indeed, been set back for seven years; and that having begun again in new surroundings, he was being confronted with another grouping of the

two essential influences which had determined his fate and then deserted him.

He had forgotten his immediate errand, he was still vaguely attempting to understand the sense of an enthralling unreality that was intoxicating him, when Cecilia came out of the theatre.

She looked up at him with a quick glance of suspicion, and then all the expression died out of her face.

'Stephen?' she said in the still, reserved voice of one who is uncertain how her overtures may be received.

But he could not at once throw off that strange and delightful sense of moving in a dream world. He felt as if he must await the issue of events, that if he attempted to influence them he must inevitably awake to the gray, unexciting routine of his common life. For a moment at least he had stepped out of the hard world of reality into a wonderland of romance, and although he knew that the magic bubble already shivered on the verge of dissipation, he wanted to hold the illusion instant by instant as it slipped away from him.

'Were you waiting for me?' she asked, still in the hard, formal voice which shrouded her emotion. For all she knew, he might have come, at last, to reproach her sin.

'Yes—I was waiting for you,' Stephen said. 'I—I have just come out of the theatre. I've been—in there.' His enveloping bubble of romance had burst and left him open to contempt. He was no longer hidden by a magical whirl of iridescence, but exposed, suddenly gauche and shabby, to the criticism of one who appeared to him in her present attitude, as a hard and worldly woman—a woman who would be ashamed of his appearance and manners.

Cecilia made a little gesture of impatience. 'Why?'

she asked, much as she might have reproved him in his boyhood for bothering her when she was practising.

'I'm sorry, mother,' Stephen said, re-acting simply to the old stimulus. 'I didn't know whether you'd mind if—if I just spoke to you.'

She looked about as if searching for some place in which he might speak to her; her glance alternately dwelling upon and rejecting the brougham as though the use of it as a meeting place offered some complicated and puzzling disadvantage.

'I wish you'd shave,' she remarked unexpectedly.

His hand went to his chin. In his reflections upon his own appearance, he had omitted that consideration. He only shaved three or four times a week, and the day before had been a Sunday.

'Whatever made you grow that moustache?' she went on petulantly. 'You used to have such a nice mouth.'

'I don't know,' he said weakly, 'It came.'

'Well, I suppose we'd better go in the brougham,' she decided; 'but I simply can't ask you in when we get home. We've a heap of people coming at ten o'clock, and you're hardly dressed for a reception, are you?'

'Perhaps I'd better come another time,' he suggested.

'Yes, of course,' she said. 'But I wanted to hear——' She stopped and regarded the figure of the chauffeur, who, for the last five minutes had been standing patiently by the door of the motor. 'Let's get in,' she said, and crossed the pavement to the invitation of the responsively opening door.

'Come in and sit down,' she said to Stephen, when she had seated herself, and added to the chauffeur, 'Find some quiet place, Adcock, Grosvenor Square or something, and then drive slowly round. I want to talk.'

Adcock touched his cap.

'Wait until we get out of the noise,' she said, as soon as they had started. 'I want to think.'

What her thoughts must have been might safely have been inferred from her speech when the suggestible Adcock, having brought them to the silences of Grosvenor Square, proceeded to tour it with the solemn regularity of a circus elephant. But, at the time, Stephen's own deductions were something wide of the truth. He had, for that evening, returned into the past, and he could not make sufficient allowance for the fact that his mother had had seven years of independence and new experience.

'I know what you're doing, of course,' she began. 'You're with James Dickinson—it was always your ambition, wasn't it?—and you're clerk of the works or something, on a new building on the Embankment.'

'How did you know?' Stephen asked. He was hurt by what he judged to be the sneer in her reference to his 'ambition!' Only an hour before, he had been proud of his success.

'I see the Medboro' paper sometimes,' she explained, and added quickly, prompted perhaps by some association of ideas. 'You know Christopher and I are married, of course? We've been married for nearly five years now.'

'No, I didn't know,' Stephen said.

'You didn't take even enough interest in me for that,' she commented. 'Well, I didn't expect it. Why should you? What I want to know is why you came to the theatre this evening?'

Stephen sighed as he contemplated the impossibility of making an explanation that involved his thoughts on the derrick, and his tantalising, abortive designs on the person of the young woman with whom he had had tea that afternoon. He blushed now, to remember that almost his first words to her had been, in effect,

a proposal of marriage. He dared not, he thought, ever confess that amazing and impudent indiscretion to his mother.

'I saw your name on the boards outside,' he said.

'And came in out of curiosity?' Cecilia concluded.

'It wasn't curiosity,' he affirmed steadily.

'What, then?' she asked. 'I want to know *why* you came,' she went on, before he could answer, 'it's important—to me; and why, having seen my performance—to an empty house—you came round to the stage-door. Do try to be as clear as you can. It—it involves so many things.'

'I was lonely,' Stephen said, plunging after essentials. 'I went in because it seemed as if in a sort of way, you belonged to me; and then, seeing you reminded me so frightfully of—of old times—before you went away. I thought perhaps you wouldn't want to see me. I'd come straight up from the works and, as a matter of fact, I'd just decided to go away again, when you came out.'

She turned towards him in the gloom of the motor, and laid her hand on his arm.

'Lonely?' she repeated, as if he had made no other statement. 'Why should you be lonely?'

'I am,' he said simply. 'There's no one in London who—who belongs to me.'

She did not appear to resent the suggestion of 'belonging' that had twice surged up to express the hidden depths of his desire.

'Aren't you engaged or anything?' she asked, and continued at once with the first sign she had given of her old habit of teasing him. 'Such a handsome, successful young man as you are, must surely be besieged by women.'

'Not by the kind I want,' he replied.

'Do you mean that there's never been even *one*?' she pressed him.

His thought flitted for an instant over the images of Bessie Ward, his cousin Phyllis Bell, and the steady blue eyes of the young woman in the tea-shop, before he replied with conviction, 'Not a single one.' He could not have borne to include, even in thought, the figure of the girl who had so nearly smiled at him as he waited by the stage-door. He was prepared to be violently angry with himself, for daring to think of her in connection with any other women he had known. Also, he had an instinctive fear of making any reference to Margaret Weatherley in his mother's hearing.

Cecilia did not reply at once, but she kept her hand on his arm.

'And so you were prepared to overlook the past for the sake of—what was it—my companionship?' she asked, after that brief interval of silence.

'I don't know,' Stephen said. 'I just felt that I wanted to see you again. When you told your stories in the theatre, it made me think of—of you and me at home.'

She caught her breath with a little gasp, but her voice was perfectly even and steady as she replied, 'Where are you living?'

'Camberwell,' he told her.

'In rooms, lodgings?'

'One room. I'm not there much.'

'What salary are you getting?'

'Three hundred a year,' he said, with the faint ring of a boast in his voice.

'I suppose that's pretty good, considering?' she remarked.

'Yes, I think it is,' Stephen said, and added, 'Mr Dickinson has been awfully kind. There's to be some sort of new arrangement when this job's done.'

'We used all of us to live on less than three hundred a year in Long Causeway,' she commented thoughtfully. 'But that's a million years ago. I've forgotten so many things. What are Emily and Hilda doing?'

'Hilda has married Cummin, the chemist in Priest-gate,' he said. 'Emily is still at the Council School—doing fairly well. She's rather taken up with this Votes for Women affair, lately, though.'

Cecilia sighed as if the thought of her daughters brought her little happiness.

'They were bitter against me, of course?' she said.

'They were, rather,' Stephen admitted.

'And weren't you?' she asked.

'Not in the same way,' he said.

'But in your own way, you were?'

'I dunno' about bitter,' he remonstrated.

'Stephen, you don't speak as nicely as you used to,' she said sharply. 'Is it the works? Or haven't you been taking trouble lately?'

'A bit of both, I expect,' he said.

'You'll have to give up those Camberwell lodgings and come and live near us in Bloomsbury,' she said, as if it had already been arranged that he was to be taken back into favour. 'We've got a house in Bedford Square, and I think I could find you rooms in Gower Street. What do you mean by saying that you're not at home much? What do you do?'

'Well, week days I'm at the works all the time,' he explained. 'I get there at eight in the morning, and I'm often there till eight at night.'

'Oh! my dear,' she exclaimed. 'Why, it's worse than the shop. We must talk about all that, but not now, I ought to have been home before this. When will you come? To-morrow evening? I shall be in by nine.'

'I'd have time to get back to Camberwell and change by then,' he commented.

'And what are you going to do now?' she asked.

'Oh! I'll get out here and go home,' he said.

Cecilia accepted that proposal without demur. She gave her instruction to Adcock through the speaking tube, and the hushed thudding of the solemn tour about Grosvenor Square abruptly ceased.

Stephen got out and stood by the door. 'What's your number in Bedford Square?' he asked.

'Sixty-four,' his mother said. 'Tell him "home," will you? And, Stephen—you're sure you want to come?' She laughed, with a touch of bitterness as she added, 'You'll condescend to know us again?'

'It isn't that,' he mumbled. 'Of course, I want to come.'

She had her hands on the door and leaned a little forward through the open window of the brougham, as she said, 'I should ask you to kiss me, if you weren't so dirty. Do shave off that ugly moustache before I see you again.'

3

Stephen walked home to Camberwell by way of Westminster Bridge. After the stimulating excitements of that emotional day, his thoughts ran hard and bright, with an effect of illuminating certainty. He saw himself clearly in relation to a world that had, almost alarmingly, enlarged its boundaries. Until this evening, he had been content to relate his life and ambitions to the contacts of his immediate circumstances. He had seen himself prospering on precisely the same lines that James Dickinson had prospered. He had taken Medborough as his standard and judged his own success accordingly. And by that criterion he had quite wonderfully succeeded. Now, he was confronted with the humiliating inference that he was

not fit to meet his mother's friends. She had made him realise that he was common and provincial—even his boyish judgment of her had been provincial. He was careless in his speech, ill-dressed, and dirty. Presently she would add to her indictment that he was ignorant and mannerless. He knew nothing of music and the stage and very little about books. He would be woefully out of his element at a dinner-party. (He stopped under an arc-lamp in Whitehall at this point of his reflection to look at his hands. They were well-shaped, his nails, although not over-clean, were otherwise presentable; but his skin was roughened and reddened by his work. He plunged them back into his pockets, with a wry face at the picture of those hands at his mother's dinner-table.) No; he could not escape the conclusion that his mother's criticism of him was more than justified.

Yet, he did not resent it. He felt no inclination to justify himself. His justification was too obvious. He had worked his way up to a certain point. What he had to consider was not whether he had done well enough, so far, but whether he was prepared to do much better.

He could not change his work; he had no wish to do that. He had confidence in his own ability to succeed in the career he had chosen, and his way was quite clear in front of him. He had already won the good opinion of Mr Bradley, the architect, who was a hard man and difficult to please, but who gave credit when it was due. Also, Stephen had lately thought out a very useful improvement in the section of cast-iron casements, an improvement that would, he believed, solve the perpetual difficulty of keeping out the wet; and might be adapted to wooden sashes and casements and to skylights. He had made his search in the patent office and meant to send in his drawings and specification

to obtain provisional protection in the course of a week or two. There would not probably be much money in it, but he would gain a certain amount of prestige from his invention.

But, having decided that he had no intention of changing his profession, he must consider what he must do in order to fit himself for the society of his mother and her friends, so far as he could foresee, all that was necessary was to take pains with his speech, his manners, and his dress. No doubt, he would be out of it at first in conversation, but he would soon learn. In seven years he had learnt his own difficult and complicated trade well enough to receive the approval of two such experts as Mr Bradley and Mr Dickinson. In six months, he would know enough of this new enterprise, to pass without comment in society. He was not shy with men, and he did not believe that he would be shy with women. Had he not proposed to one before he had known her two minutes?

That thought, however, gave a sudden twist to his reflections. He was ashamed, now, of that episode of the afternoon. His mother, of course, would have disapproved, but that did not count. It was only one more piece of evidence to back the indictment that he was perfectly willing to admit. Until this evening, he had never professed to be anything more than an ordinary builder's clerk, in his way of life. Now, he was ashamed of his precocious approach to a strange woman, for another and far more serious reason. He had been untrue to his own ideals of love. He had, indeed, forgotten that he had ever had an ideal. The seed of it had been sown in his boyhood and lain neglected and unrecognised. Now, at one glimpse of a remembered face and gesture, the seed had miraculously flowered.

The approach to that thought set him trembling. He knew, and yet dared not admit to himself, that she, no less than his mother, was the influence who had turned his ambition towards the goal of 'becoming a gentleman'—he neither knew nor sought for any other phrase for it. So far as he could understand his own aspirations, he wanted to approach her through his mother. If 'approach' was not an altogether too vainglorious word in this connection. Strangely enough, he could not think of her, without becoming angry with himself. He was furiously annoyed when he remembered that on this second occasion, as on the first, he had stood gauche, awkward, and solemn when she had hailed him. He was not less annoyed with himself for daring to think that he might have done anything else.

He dug his hands a trifle deeper into his pockets and quickened his pace.

At the corner of the Grove he collided with a workman coming from the opposite direction.

'Nah, then, clumsy,' the workman said, addressing Stephen as an equal.

Stephen drew himself up and checked his impulse to reply in the vernacular. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm afraid I wasn't looking where I was going.'

'No 'arm done, sir,' the workman replied in a conciliated and respectful tone, as he passed on into the night.

Stephen continued his walk with the feeling that he had made a further step towards raising himself. He realised without vanity that he had the essence of the thing in him. He had let that side of his life slide during the past few years, but only because he had been so intent on his work. He would have no difficulty in recovering his accent. He could do it at any time by an effort of attention, but he had to cultivate that way

of speaking until it became second nature, until he could speak like Christopher Threlfall or the bishop's wife. And he must get his hands into condition again, and learn how he ought to dress and behave. His mother would teach him. She had probably learnt many things herself in the course of the last seven years.

And the object of all these determinations, so he explicitly told himself, was that he should never again give his mother cause to be ashamed of him. He was proud to have recovered her. He believed that presently he and she would resume their old relations. He knew how that end was to be accomplished, and he was quite prepared to be her diligent and acquiescent pupil.

4

He made a good beginning early next morning by shaving off his moustache. Contemplating the effect, he decided that his mother had been right. He looked, perhaps, rather younger without it; but he had, as she had said, quite a nice mouth, and his moustache had given just a touch of 'commonness' to his appearance.

His next act of discipline involved a greater effort. He noted the foreman's look of surprise when he was addressed in Stephen's 'society' voice. They would all say, of course, that he was 'putting on airs, getting a bit above himself.' Well, that couldn't be helped. His mistake had lain in not having adopted that voice from the first. However, they would soon get used to it, and cease to wink at each other behind his back. He hoped that his new accent would not spoil his friendly relations with the foreman. It was essential that they should all work together.

He was not guilty of more than half a dozen lapses in the course of the day, but the last of them was serious. He swore with a 'b' instead of a 'd,' and he noted the faint smile of relief on the face of Bennett, the works foreman, as he did it. They were in the office just cleaning up for the day, and Stephen decided to attempt some kind of explanation. It would never do for him to lose the respect of Bennett.

'Think I've been putting on airs to-day, Bennett?' he asked.

Bennett took off his cap and scratched his head. 'Well, a bit of the 'igh 'orse, so to speak, Mr Kirkwood,' he said. 'I was afraid 'smorning somethin' 'ad upset you.' Stephen found that his explanation was going to be uncommonly difficult. 'You see, I've got to educate myself,' he tried.

'Ah!' commented Bennett, with an air of understanding, and then, as Stephen remained silent, he continued, 'We know, o' course, as you'll be the boss one o' these days, Mr Kirkwood, but it don't do any 'arm to keep on good terms with your men. You can talk 'ow you like, so far 's I'm concerned, but I wouldn't give the men the chance to say as you're getting too big for your boots. You're well-liked in a manner of speakin', but they won't stand no 'igh falutin'. They don't get it from Mr Dickinson and they won't expect it from you.'

Stephen pondered that statement as he hurried back to Camberwell to change his clothes. Bennett was unquestionably right, and Stephen had to face the problem of whether he would be able to swear with a 'b' and use the vernacular in working hours, and yet be able to assume his cultured accent at all other times without producing any effect of effort. Nothing but practical experience could settle that question, he thought.

He was not unduly nervous as he rang the bell of the big house in Bedford Square. Although his temperament was shot with a vivid thread of artistic sensibility inherited from Cecilia, its influence upon his general character was manifested in a quickening of his perceptions, rather than in a nervous excitability. Moreover, as he waited for an answer to his ring he was thinking more of his mother than of himself. He had not as yet had a clear sight of her, but his impression had been that she had grown younger with the years.

Some intimation of the difficulties of the new way of life, dawned upon him when the door was opened by a gentlemanly-looking individual in a dark morning coat and a black tie. Stephen's first idea was that the man was a clergyman, his second that he was a visitor in the house who happened to be in the hall when the bell rang.

'Oh! I say,' Stephen said apologetically, 'do you happen to know if my—if Mrs Threlfall is in?'

'Mrs Threlfall is at home, sir,' the man replied, and stood aside for Stephen to enter.

'My name's Kirkwood,' Stephen explained, as the door was delicately closed behind him. He was still puzzled.

'Mrs Threlfall is expectin' you, sir. This way, please,' the man said, and after tactfully relieving Stephen of his deer-stalker, he gravely preceded him upstairs.

Stephen followed, slightly abashed. He realised his mistake now, and hoped that his mother would not hear about it. His embarrassment was not relieved when the door of the first floor drawing-room was thrown open and his name impressively and clearly announced. He had a momentary fear that he was being shown into a room full of people.

And the room itself intimidated him. It had an

air of spaciousness, of refinement, of delicacy that was entirely new in his experience. The best in this kind that was as yet known to him was Mr Dickinson's house in the Lincoln Road, and that, by comparison, had a solid, almost coarse masculinity. It had appealed to Stephen as luxurious, but he had not been afraid of it as he was of this feminine, artistic place. The cream walls, the bright chintzes, the pale rose carpet made him feel suddenly gross and awkward, as if by his mere presence he must fatally soil so elegant a place.

Cecilia was alone, reading by the light of a rose-shaded lamp. She jumped up as he came in, and after a just perceptible hesitation, said, 'You can put on the light, Butler.'

There was a sound of brisk clicking by the door, and the room instantly leapt into full being, changing its air of mysterious and sensitive delicacy for a bright and challenging design of outline and colour.

'Well, so you've found your way, Stephen,' Cecilia said nervously, as the door was closed with a soft determination, behind the retreating form of Butler. She was in evening dress, and her beautiful shoulders and arms seemed to take up and enhance the brilliance of her surroundings. She was inevitably posed as the essential jewel for which all else was only an effective setting.

'Oh! yes; no difficulty about finding it,' Stephen replied, coming forward to greet her with a kind of anxious discretion. All the courage had ebbed out of him. He knew for the first time what his mother had meant when in the old days she had talked of stage fright. He had a sense of being so completely displayed. He was conscious that his every movement, his every tone, every detail of his appearance, were quite unfairly conspicuous.

She held out her little white plump hand to him

and then lifted her face to be kissed. Stephen performed his part of the ceremony as if she were a creature of infinite fragility.

'Well!' she said, and laughed nervously. 'Your greeting is hardly cordial, little son,' she went on quickly. 'Or do you find me rather terrifying? Sit down, for goodness' sake, and smoke—if you do smoke?—and then tell me all about yourself. Am I much altered, do you think, or would you have recognised me? I'm forty-eight, Stephen. It's no good trying to hide the truth from you, is it? Quite an old woman.'

She had sat down again while she was speaking, and as Stephen rather gingerly bent himself into a low chintz-covered arm-chair near her, she pushed a silver cigarette box towards him.

'Smoke while you're thinking what to say,' she said. 'It saves time.'

The quotation quickened Stephen to a realisation that he was failing most signally in his first attempt to play the game of going into society. He accepted the cigarette that was offered to him, though it seemed little short of sacrilege to smoke in that room, and attempted a rally by saying,—

'You might have told me always to say 'Your Majesty' too, mother.' And he pointed his remark by a glance round the room.

She nodded approvingly. 'I'm glad you haven't forgotten,' she said. 'Does it all strike you as—opulent, Stephen?'

'It terrifies me,' he replied, feeling his way towards a sense of being at ease in those surroundings.

'It mustn't,' she said. 'It won't in a day or two; when you're dressed to fit it. Are those your "best things?" Medboro', aren't they? You must go to Christopher's tailor. I'll treat you to a complete outfit.'

'Oh! I'm not so very hard up,' he protested.

She waved that aside with the old familiar gesture, '“This is my son who was dead and is alive again,”' she said, 'and if he wants to please me, he must do what I tell him. We've lots of money, Stephen; and we're not a bit extravagant, considering. You must humour me by letting me spend something on you. And you haven't told me yet whether you think I've altered.'

'Yes, you have,' he said seriously. 'You look so much younger.'

'Even in this light?' she asked. 'I had it put on, on purpose.'

She leaned forward, presenting herself for inspection, and Stephen realised for the first time that her face was very perfectly 'made up.' She instantly noted the slight change in his expression consequent on that discovery, and threw herself back in her chair.

'Well, of course, my dear little boy!' she said; 'and I meant you to know it; because I have a plan to show you one day just what your mother really looks like, now—creased and lined and withered and old, so dreadfully old. That shall be our secret, but I mean to keep a brave face to the world for years yet. Also Stephen, there's another secret we shall have to keep before the world outside the family, and that is our relation to one another. I'm afraid it wouldn't do for me to have such a very grown-up son falling out of the sky. Would you mind much being a nephew? Do you think you could manage to think of me as an aunt when there are people about?'

Stephen was a trifle shocked. The provincial in him not less than the sturdy workman, shrank from this world of chicanerie and intrigue, in which women of nearly fifty achieved an effect of thirty-five, and disguised their relation to their own children. At the same time, he was slightly excited by the novelty of

the excursion, and if only it had not been his mother who figured as the representative of the theatrical method, he would probably have entered into this new life with the usual gusto of the neophyte.

'Of course; if you like,' he said. 'I'll try to remember when there's anybody else about. I—I rather wish it wasn't necessary.'

'You see, Stephen,' she explained; 'I'm trying to get on the stage—properly. I don't call that performance of mine you saw last night going on the stage. Telling stories to the pit and gallery, with people dropping into the stalls and the dress-circle as if you weren't there, is perfectly horrid. I loathe it, and Christopher did all he could to dissuade me from starting it again. I dropped it more than five years ago, after Christopher began to make such a lot of money with his music, and I shouldn't have taken it up again if I hadn't wanted to get a part in comedy. It does give managers some kind of chance to see you——'

She was going on with the account of her ambitions and prospects, but Stephen could not wait any longer to put the question that was troubling him.

'But why do you want to go on the stage?' he asked bluntly. 'If you've got all the money you want, I mean, and so on?'

'Oh! my dear little boy,' Cecilia threw at him contemptuously; 'are you still living in the nineteenth century? Why does Emily want a vote? Why does any woman want to have some other occupation than looking after her house and family?'

'And, of course, you haven't even got a family now?' Stephen put in on a note of conciliation.

'Only a very small one,' she returned, with a slight embarrassment.

He did not follow that. 'No children, at least only grown up ones, I meant,' he said.

'Oh! didn't you know that you had a little half-brother?' Cecilia asked, striving for a lightness of touch that she failed to achieve. She wanted to win Stephen back to her now, and she knew intuitively that this confession held an element of danger. She felt, absurdly, as if she were admitting some infidelity.

And Stephen, on his part, was certainly experiencing a sensation that can only be likened to a twinge of jealousy. He had been jealous of Christopher Threlfall, seven years before, but this seemed a nearer and more personal thing. In the surprise of the moment, indeed, he could not conceal his repugnance to the news she had sprung upon him. He had a queer sense that she had somehow taken an unfair advantage of his separation from her.

'No, I didn't know,' he said moodily. 'When? I mean how old is he?'

Cecilia was watching him anxiously. She was glad that he should be annoyed, but she knew that the situation was critical, that if she were not careful she might lose him. Her temperament prompted her to risk everything on a single throw.

She leaned forward and looked at Stephen as she might once have looked at Christopher Threlfall.

'He's just six; but he won't make any difference—to us, Stephen,' she said. 'No one else could ever take your place with me. My dear, you don't know how I've missed you; and how I've searched that wretched Medboro' paper, every week, looking for your name if it were only in the score of a cricket match.'

Stephen was confused. He blushed and looked down, as if he could not bear to meet her eyes. But, in his heart, he was immensely flattered, he was thrilled and rejoicing.

'Did you really?' he replied clumsily. 'I thought you'd probably forgotten all about me.'

She got up and came over to him, stooped gracefully and kissed his hair. 'Some day, dear—some day soon now, I hope—I'll tell you all about it,' she said, resting her hand on his shoulder. 'I've suffered more than you could ever guess, and I do want my little boy, Stephen, back again.'

'Well, you've got me back,' he mumbled, still too confused to look up at her. 'It's all right now.'

She laughed with an assumption of lightness, and went back to her own chair without pressing him further. She knew that her game was won for the time being, and having got him back she had perfect confidence in her power to hold him. 'It's the privilege of an old woman to be a little sentimental with her children,' she said gaily. 'And now, Stephen dear, I'm going to ring for Christopher and your grandfather. I told them not to come up until I had had my talk with you. But they both want to see you again. You don't mind, do you? Your grandfather has always had a soft place in his heart for you.'

'No, I don't mind, rather not,' Stephen said. The flush had not yet died out of his cheeks, and he had to make an effort to appear at ease. But as she put out her hand to the bell, he realised the feebleness of his own part in the little drama they had been playing, and tried to show her that gauche as his manner had been, it had hidden a very real emotion.

'I—I needn't call you "aunt" before them, need I?' he asked. 'It's—it's rather jolly to say "mother" again.'

'Dear little boy,' Cecilia returned, with a fond smile that sealed their pledge of renewed affection; and added, 'You look so much nicer without that horrid moustache.'

Stephen glowed again. In those few minutes he had forgiven her everything; her old desertion of him, the chicanerie of her present way of life, even that tragic

infidelity which had permitted her to supersede him, to rob him of the proud distinction of being her only son. She was such an amazing, splendid, and charming mother for a man, fresh from the dullness of Medboro', the sordid realities of Leicester, and the depressions of a bed-sitting room in Camberwell. Some day he would tell her how the thought of her had blessedly saved him from the advances of Bessie Ward.

5

Stephen found in Christopher Threlfall, greater and more reasonable changes than those exhibited by Cecilia. Threlfall was unquestionably older, and fatter; and something of the intellectuality seemed to have gone from his face. He had begun to look a little coarse and self-satisfied. Neither his manner nor his voice had changed, however; and Stephen was flattered by the warmth of his greeting.

Old Edwardes, on the other hand, seemed rather to have taken Cecilia as his pattern. He certainly looked no older than he had when Stephen had last seen him on the night of the great crisis; and now he had so evidently found a *milieu* that suited him. In his evening dress, with the concession made either to his age or his artistry, by a black velvet dinner jacket, he might have sat for the type of an old aristocrat. And he bore his seventy-seven years with the pride of one aware of his undimmed faculties. He had neither the air nor the mannerisms of senility. He hailed Stephen with a warm handshake and a slap on the shoulder.

'Heavens, how the boy's filled out,' he said. 'Eh, Threlfall? Just feel that deltoid.'

'Ever play cricket now, Stephen?' Threlfall asked.

'I suppose that innings of yours against the town has taken its place among the historical records of the King's School.'

'Oh! I don't know,' Stephen mumbled. He was proud to be accepted as an intimate relation into this household of splendour and luxury, but the entrance of his grandfather and Threlfall had revived the consciousness of his own coarseness. Never would he be able to make his hands look like those of Threlfall or old Edwardes. Nor did he think it possible that he could ever wear evening dress with that air of having been born to it. Yet his grandfather had been a despised piano-tuner living in one wretched room in New England. And if breed were the explanation of his ready assumption of the ways and appearance of aristocracy, surely Stephen himself had the same advantage? How often his mother had persuaded him that he was a true Edwardes. She had even instanced his hands. He buried them hastily in his jacket pockets.

'Still as modest as ever,' Threlfall commented, with an approving smile. He had taken up his stand on the hearthrug and was clipping the end of a cigar. 'What are you smoking?' he asked.

'I won't smoke any more now, thanks,' Stephen said. Smoking necessitated the use of his hands. He wished that they would talk among themselves and let him listen.

That, however, was evidently not their present intention. He was the visitor of the evening, and although Stephen himself was supremely ignorant of the fact, each of them had a personal reason for welcoming him.

They questioned him about his work, a subject upon which he could at least give intelligent if occasionally unintelligible replies.

'Technical beggar, he is,' Threlfall remarked, after one of these recondities had slipped off Stephen's tongue. 'What in the name of Dickinson is a "sump," old chap?'

'It's a sort of well,' Stephen explained, 'to take the surface and waste water. We've got a very deep foundation, you see, and we're below the level of the main drain and have to pump up to it.'

'Newspaper offices you're building, aren't they?' Threlfall asked.

Stephen nodded. 'The engine house is in the sub-basement,' he added; 'on the raft, you know.'

'We'll all come and see it, and you must take us round,' Cecilia put in.

'Yes, rather, when there's a bit more to see,' Stephen agreed. 'We're not up to the ground floor yet, with anything except the steel-work. Take you up to the top of the Scotchman, of course, if you like. You get a splendid view from there, but you'd have to go *up* in the bucket, I expect; it's an awful climb.'

Threlfall grinned. 'Translate,' he said.

'Which?' Stephen asked.

'Well, Scotchman.'

'Oh! that's the derrick, the big crane,' Stephen said. 'They call them Scotchmen in the trade because they save such a lot of money.'

He had had no idea of making a joke, but they all laughed, and he laughed with them.

'Well, well, I'll wait till you get the lift in, Stephen,' chuckled old Edwardes. 'I don't quite see myself dangling and spinning in mid air on one of those contrivances. I was watching one in Oxford Street the other day.'

'I suppose you think nothing of it?' Threlfall inquired.

'I don't have to go up often,' Stephen said. 'But

when I do, I go up in the bucket. It saves time. It's perfectly safe, of course.'

He found that Cecilia was regarding him with a look of proud approval.

Everything was going very well, Stephen thought. He was beginning to realise the advantage of being an expert in one subject.

At half-past ten, Butler brought up an imposing selection of decanters, aerated water bottles, and glasses on one tray, and a complete apparatus for making tea on another. Cecilia looked at Stephen as she set about her preparations.

'A new habit of mine, little boy,' she said. 'Will you have tea, too, or do you drink whisky and soda now?'

'Oh! tea, I think, thank you, mother,' he said. He felt that she had strangely singled him out by that little speech. She had made an implicit reference to their old life together in Long Causeway; and in doing it had told him that he alone was able fully to understand her old life.

As he took his cup from her, he bent down and said in a low voice, 'You must have so many new habits now.'

'But I have kept a few old ones,' she replied, with the same effect of making a suggestion that only he could understand.

After his tea, Stephen began to smoke. He had forgotten his hands. The other three still kept him in the focus of interest, but now they had exhausted their inquiries about his profession and were busy discussing his future. Cecilia began to make plans for finding him rooms in Gower Street or Bloomsbury Street, the very next morning.

'You ought to have a sitting-room,' she said. 'Of course, you can come in here whenever you like, but

you want a place that you can invite your own friends to.'

Stephen shook his head. 'Haven't got any friends of that sort,' he said. 'Besides, I can't afford two rooms.'

Cecilia conceded that, and went on to make an appointment for him the next day at the shop of her husband's tailor in Conduit Street. 'I'll meet you there at twelve o'clock,' she said.

Stephen hesitated.

'Yes, you must, Stephen, I insist,' she urged him. 'You promised me just now that you'd let me give you a complete outfit. Medboro' clothes are all right for Medboro', but they won't do for town. Twelve o'clock in Conduit Street, to-morrow, please, Stephen.'

'Perhaps he'd sooner meet me there,' Threlfall put in pleasantly. 'A man doesn't usually take his mother to his tailor's.'

On the whole, Stephen thought that he would sooner go with Threlfall.

'Very well,' Cecilia agreed good-humouredly. 'Only, Christopher, you must tell them to get him something ready by next Sunday.'

'Rather short notice,' Threlfall said.

'Never mind, they'll do it if you make a point of it,' Cecilia replied.

'What happens on Sunday?' Stephen asked, rather absent-mindedly. He was thinking that he would have to go down to the Embankment in his best clothes the next day. He could not face a Conduit Street tailor in the suit he always wore at the works. Would Bennett mark that as further evidence that young Kirkwood was getting too big for his boots?

'Oh! we always get people in on Sunday afternoon,' Cecilia said, and then went on with an odd change of manner. 'And, by the way, there'll be some one you'll

remember next Sunday, Margaret Weatherley, Dr Weatherley's eldest girl. She's walking on, just for fun, at the Auditorium. Some people think her quite beautiful. But, of course, she was only a child when they left Medboro'. You'd hardly remember.'

Her voice had suddenly become hard and bitter, and Stephen looked up with an acute sense of wrongdoing. For an instant, he believed that his mother must have known in some wonderful, intuitive way that she had named the one being who could ever come between them; the one being for whose sake he might desert her with no more compunction than she had once deserted him. But Cecilia was not looking at him but at her husband.

'Christopher thinks Margaret quite beautiful,' she continued; 'don't you, Christopher?'

Threlfall laughed a trifle self-consciously. 'Oh! I don't know about beautiful,' he said. 'She's unquestionably pretty.' He turned to Stephen as he went on, speaking rather rapidly. 'Her father, you know, is by way of being quite a famous publicist, tremendously keen on Tariff Reform, still, although it seems a bit out of date now. All the same, Weatherley's a man to be taken seriously. But I don't know if you take the least interest in politics, Stephen?'

'No. I don't think I do,' Stephen said. 'Naturally I'm up against the unions, all the time. Every builder must be.'

They talked for a few minutes of the Trades Union movement, but all the life had gone out of the evening. For the first time it was evident that they were making polite conversation. The touch of a living interest had gone. They were separated, each of them preoccupied with some personal thought or anxiety that they wanted greater leisure to consider.

'I say, I ought to be going,' Stephen said. 'It's a good step from here to Camberwell.'

'Not going to walk, are you?' Threlfall asked on a note of amused surprise.

'I dare say I shall pick up a tram at the bridge,' Stephen said.

They made no effort to detain him; but his mother went down with him to the front door. She kissed him in the hall, as she said 'good-night,' and impressed upon him the importance of remembering his engagement with Christopher for twelve the next day. But something of the spirit had gone out of her vivacity. She looked tired, and now Stephen could see that the past seven years had, indeed, left their mark on her.

Chapter Five

I

STEPHEN went to Bedford Square the following Sunday, with the fixed purpose of not allowing himself to fall in love with Margaret Weatherley. His reasons for this determination were many and irreproachable. The chief of them was that he must ever be hopelessly her inferior. He might worship her from a respectful distance, but he meant if possible to avoid speaking to her.

His other reasons, if equally impeccable, were less idealistic. He realised, for example, that falling in love with Miss Weatherley would be a waste of life. He could never hope to marry her. Her father was a rich and distinguished man. Stephen was a builder's clerk of works, the son of a small bookseller and of a woman who, however wonderful and brilliant she might be, was probably not regarded with approval by Dr Weatherley. Even if Stephen were admitted to some sort of junior partnership in the firm two years hence, he would not in all probability, be considered eligible. And by way of a dominating and determining motive-giving force to all his other reasons, was the consciousness that his newly recovered relations with his mother, would not admit of a divided allegiance.

He had seen Cecilia twice since his first evening in Bedford Square, and although she had given him no more confidences with regard to her inner life, she had displayed a new attitude towards him. She had in a great measure relinquished her authority. She seemed

to lean on him, to look to him for strength and sympathy. That charming mood of tenderness which in the old days had been reserved for those times when she particularly wished to reward or encourage him, had been uppermost on both these occasions. She had been gentle and gracious to him, implying both by her words and her manner that his presence would, in future, be absolutely essential to her happiness. He had wondered, but had not yet dared to ask, whether her second marriage had not been a disappointment. He remembered the chill that had descended upon them all when she had made that reference to Miss Weatherley on the night of his first visit to their house. Was it possible that Threlfall had shown a tendency to flirt with other women? Stephen was sure that his mother would never stand that—not even from himself. She must be first; a fact that brought him back again to the necessity for an answering fidelity.

Finally, he quite clearly, even passionately, wanted to be faithful to her. Something of pity had begun to tinge his thought of her. He had not seen his half-brother yet, but it was evident that the little Christopher was not greatly loved by his mother. Stephen had gathered that the boy had been very delicate, had been spoiled, and had developed an unruly and intensely egotistical temper. 'Chris is a very difficult child,' Cecilia had said, and her tone had implied that she thought a stricter discipline would be good for him . . .

Stephen had a fairly good conceit of himself, this afternoon. He felt protected by these fine resolutions to devote himself to his mother; as if the knowledge that he could and would please her made him independent of other opinion. Also, he was aware of being well dressed. Mr Bland of Conduit Street had protested that the request to supply a suit in four days was ridiculous; that the thing could not be done, and even

if it could there was no precedent for such an undertaking in the annals of a firm which had been established in the days of William IV. And Threlfall had smiled and agreed, and when the suggestion had been finally argued out of existence, had said, 'Well, Bland, I'm sure you'll find a way of doing it for once, as a favour.' And the miracle had been performed. The remainder of the large order was not to be delivered for a fortnight, after endless further ordeals of 'trying on.' Stephen had not, it must be confessed, any real feeling for clothes. He liked to feel inconspicuous, and he knew that the only way to achieve a relative invisibility in his mother's drawing-room was to go to a West-End tailor. But he loathed the business of ordering and trying-on, and the result only pleased him inasmuch as it would serve as a kind of protective colouration in the society he was going to meet.

He went early to Bedford Square at his mother's suggestion, and found her alone when he arrived. She was in great spirits that afternoon, and after looking him up and down and making an unnecessary readjustment of his tie, she congratulated him warmly on his appearance.

'You do set your things off well, Stephen,' she said. 'I suppose it's your build and the way you carry yourself. You'll certainly look better dressed than any one who's coming this afternoon. They're all either theatrical or musical, and the theatrical lot will be over dressed and the others untidy. Probably you and Christopher will be the only two men in the room who'll look like gentlemen. As for the women—but never mind that. When are you going to move your things to the place in Bloomsbury Street? I do want to have you a little nearer. Camberwell is so dreadfully out of the way.'

Stephen said he proposed to move on the following

Saturday, and after she had protested that he might just as well have gone in at once and paid his Camberwell landlady a week's rent in lieu of notice, she began to plan all the things they would do together when she had him living so conveniently near.

She was still planning when Threlfall joined them, and she expounded the essentials of her programme to him as a scheme finally settled. Stephen had a passing doubt as to whether Threlfall might not resent what apparently promised to be the permanent intrusion of a new member into the Bedford Square household, but he seemed, on the contrary, to be genuinely pleased by the proposal.

'That will be jolly,' he approved in a voice that carried some suggestion of relief; and Stephen felt comforted and a little stirred.

2

The 'At Home,' so far as Stephen was concerned, was divided into two distinct and unrelated periods.

During the first he conscientiously did his best, and in his own opinion, at least, succeeded. People, quite a lot of people, drifted in and out. A few of them stayed, but the majority put in an appearance for half an hour or so, and then left. Among this crowd Butler and two female acolytes dexterously threaded their way with salvers bearing chiefly tea and cakes, although there were whisky and liqueurs and other excitements on a side table that had got into one corner of the room and was trying not to look like a buffet.

All you had to do, Stephen found, was to get reasonably out of the way and watch and listen—so far as you could listen to anything particular, through that bright high clatter of women's voices and laughter.

They were, he privately decided, a very noisy lot. Now and again his mother would snatch him out of his retreat and introduce him to some star of the theatrical or musical world as 'My nephew, Stephen Kirkwood,' bringing out his name with an aplomb that seemed to give it a great air of distinction. But none of these introductions involved him in the difficulties of polite conversation. His new acquaintance either bowed, made the usual acknowledgment of the pleasure he derived from this brief encounter, and turned to some other distraction; or after a few seconds of rapid and irrelevant gabble, was diverted by the appearance of some more familiar friend.

Stephen's first approach to any intelligible talk was in progress when the first period of the afternoon suddenly ended and the second began.

It was nearly six o'clock by that time, and the room was less crowded. Cecilia had an air that said the worst was now over, and was smoking a cigarette—another of her new habits. She caught sight of Stephen across the room, hailed him with a smile, and then brought across to him a plain but intellectual-looking woman of forty or so, whom she introduced as Mona Crantock, with the aside, 'You know, dear. She wrote that extraordinary play, *The Fire of God*, that every one has been talking about.'

Miss Crantock looked at Stephen with interest. 'Ought I to know you?' she asked. 'Have you got anything to do with the stage?'

'Nothing whatever,' Stephen said.

'Nor with literature?' she went on.

'Nor with literature,' he repeated.

'Politics, perhaps?' she tried.

Stephen laughed. He was attracted by her air of candour and perfect self-possession. 'I don't do anything important,' he said. 'I'm just anybody.'

'One of Cecilia's ornaments?' suggested Miss Crantock.

'If that,' he hazarded.

'You look so distinguished,' she went on. 'I thought at first you must be either a successful young actor or one of these modern poets that cut their hair and dress like undergraduates. But afterwards I decided that it must be politics. Don't you do anything?'

'I'm a—a builder,' he said. He was not sure that his mother would like him to describe himself as a clerk of the works.

Miss Crantock looked at him doubtfully. 'What do you build?' she asked. 'Empires, for example?'

'Just buildings,' he explained. 'I'm looking after those big newspaper offices that are going up on the Embankment, not far from De Keyser's Hotel. I don't know if you know the place?'

'How wonderful!' Miss Crantock exclaimed fervidly. 'Yes, I know the place, with that enormous crane that pushes its great beak about as if it were trying to see over the tops of all the houses. And do you really know how and where everything has got to go. It has always been incredible to me that any one could plan, ahead, all the details of a place like that. Tell me, don't you leave a lot to chance and work it in as you go along?'

'Well, hardly,' Stephen said, smiling. 'For instance,' he continued, seeking still further to arouse her naïve astonishment; 'we know almost to a pound of nails how much material we are going to use in the job, before it's begun.'

'It's incredible,' gasped Miss Crantock, and in her rapt contemplation of this marvel, she missed the change in her companion's manner when Butler announced 'Miss Margaret Weatherley; Miss Grace Weatherley.'

Stephen had ceased to expect her, and had been

relieved by her absence. If his determinations were to be maintained, it was just as well to avoid temptation. He had meant to refrain from looking at her or speaking to her, if it were possible, and he had known that the first of those two acts of self-denial might prove exceedingly difficult. For he had no doubt that, in some mysterious way, Margaret Weatherley was to have an extraordinary influence upon him.

She had appeared, leaping suddenly out of the even background of life, at two critical moments of spiritual disturbance arising from his relations with his mother. And although he did not consciously recognise any meaning or intention in this coincidence, he was fully aware that the personality of Margaret Weatherley had an incomprehensible significance for him. Why the thought of her should be mingled with fear, he did not, and never attempted to, understand. The reasonable explanation of his impulse to avoid her was contained in his realisation of his own social inferiority and of the fact that Margaret was in some sense a rival to his mother.

And now, when Margaret came at the last moment and unexpectedly into his mother's drawing-room, Stephen's impulse to fly from her rose for an instant almost to panic. For seeing her here, clearly for the first time, he saw that she was more unattainable and dangerous than he had ever dreamed. She was, indeed, one of those rarely beautiful women who intoxicate men's minds with the fumes of romance. Her features and complexion would have passed triumphantly the common tests of beauty, but it was rather the proportions and, as it were, the delicate finish of her that created that striking impression of unusual perfection. No man looking at her would have paused in the first instance to inquire what kind of spirit or intelligence animated that ideal loveliness. Ninety-nine men out

of a hundred would, if they had had the chance, have married her without inquiring. Her beauty was, for the male mind, sufficient; and she was by virtue of it exempt from criticism. Nevertheless, the effect of her upon the hopelessly ineligible was often one of disguised resentment. Young clerks would stare after her in the street, nudge each other in their first bewilderment, and find expression for their feelings in a rakish 'By Gad!' Afterwards they would seek a cause to depreciate her attractions. 'Shouldn't care to marry a girl like that, all the same,' they would protest, seeking to re-establish their own pride.

Little wonder that Stephen was a trifle panic-stricken.

Miss Crantock, posing an important question with regard to the general methods of building, was surprised to receive no answer, and withdrew her gaze from the thought-projected screen, upon which she was trying to visualise her idea of construction in order to look at her companion. When she saw that he was watching Margaret, Miss Crantock laughed gaily.

'Yes! isn't she?' she asked.

Stephen desperately disengaged himself from the hypnotic influence.

'I beg your pardon,' he said.

'You needn't,' Miss Crantock replied. 'I'm not jealous; it always happens. When you're in the middle of a fascinating conversation with a man and he suddenly says, "By Jove! who's that girl?" you reply, "Oh! Margaret Weatherley," without troubling to look up.'

'You know her, then?' was all Stephen could find to say.

'Yes, I thought of writing a play for her, but she can't act, and knows it. This walking-on business at the Auditorium is just frivolity. She's the sort of young

woman who could make the fortunes of a musical comedy by just being Margaret Weatherley, but I fancy she has got too much sense for that.'

'Has she?' commented Stephen. He was quite content to listen if Miss Crantock would go on discussing this subject, and she, on her part, had realised that she would get no more information about the mysteries of building just then.

'Yes, really she isn't a bad sort of girl,' she said, speaking with the privileged detachment of a sister-woman. 'Spoilt, of course; but that was inevitable. All the same, she seems quite a sensible, good-natured little thing, if you get her alone with no men in the room. It doesn't give her a chance to be herself when every man she meets insists upon adoring her, as if she'd just come straight down from God. Perhaps some day she'll fall in love with some good practical creature who'll consent to overlook her beauty for the sake of her other virtues. Her only other chance, so far as I can see, would be to marry a blind man.'

'Yes,' said Stephen.

'Instead of which,' concluded Miss Crantock, 'she'll probably marry some blasé aristocrat, with six houses, a steam yacht, and a ruined constitution. She'd be worth that in the open market.'

Stephen shivered. Although he was eager to insist upon the complete hopelessness of his own chances, he hoped that Margaret might meet with a happier fate than that prophesied by Miss Crantock.

'You've never seen her before, I suppose?' she continued.

'Practically not—at least not for seven years,' Stephen said.

Miss Crantock's woolly black eyebrows went up with an expression of interested surprise.

'Dr Weatherley, her father, was the head master of

the school I went to in Medboro', before he came into his money,' Stephen explained.

'He has got the manners of a schoolmaster still,' commented Miss Crantock. 'And I suppose, even at—how old, thirteen, fourteen?—her ladyship was, well, adored by the boys at the school?'

'In a way,' Stephen said.

'Including Mr Kirkwood, no doubt?' Miss Crantock persisted, with a grim smile.

Stephen blushed furiously. The blood so burnt his face that he had to stoop to cover his shame. 'Me? Oh, no,' he mumbled. 'I—I've never spoken to her.'

'Oh! spoken to her! What's that?' persisted Miss Crantock ruthlessly. 'Didn't she ever make eyes at you?'

Until then, Stephen had taken a certain pleasure in his companion's conversation, but that last question made him suddenly furious. 'No, she did not,' he said savagely.

Miss Crantock nodded her head with an air of having got all she wanted. 'I dare say she never got the chance?' she remarked.

'No,' Stephen replied curtly. His face still burnt as if he had been all day in the hot sun. He wished that he could get rid of this ugly, inquisitive woman who was so callously searching out the hidden secrets of his soul. He looked round for a means of release and could see none. Margaret, with her back to him, his mother and Threlfall were talking in a compact little group by the fireplace. The other people in the room—six or seven in all now—were involved in two other groups, each of them apparently engrossed in discussion. The idea of quietly escaping without a word to any one, presented itself to him as full of saving possibilities.

'I ought to be going,' he said, nerving himself to face Miss Crantock's exploring stare.

'Not without speaking to Miss Weatherley, surely?' she commented, with an ironical smile. 'After seven years, you know. Such a delightfully Biblical period! Don't you feel at all like Jacob, waiting for his reward? Only, of course, Laban put him off with the wrong one.'

Stephen was not listening. He had been staring intently at his mother, hoping to catch her eye and signal to her that he was going quietly. But Cecilia seemed to be quite unaware of his call for help, and then, without the least warning, Margaret turned right round and looked straight at him.

Stephen's heart began to beat painfully. The concussion of it seemed to shake his whole body. For a moment he wondered if he were going to faint. He felt that if she came over to him, he could not endure it; that he would have to rush disgracefully out of the room.

He was spared that humiliation, for Margaret, after a moment of suspense, turned back to her conversation with Threlfall and Cecilia. But she had recognised him, and once again she had smiled; not, as when she had first chosen him, with a gay coquettishness, but reflectively, reminiscently, with a serious consideration.

Stephen recovered his normal consciousness to the sound of Miss Crantock's voice saying, in a teasing whisper, 'She hasn't forgotten you, you see, after all these long years. Surely you won't go, now, without speaking to her?'

Stephen felt strongly urged to reply, 'What on earth has that to do with you?' Miss Crantock's presence annoyed him. He wanted a minute's leisure to debate the tremendous alternatives of going at once or risking an introduction to Margaret. Now that that trembling fit had passed, he felt rather more sure of himself. He had found the common excuse for not wanting her too passionately. She was just too beautiful to love. She

was a picture, a work of art, a creation of genius to be contemplated with profound respect and admiration from a restraining distance. To fall in love with her would, he knew instinctively, involve the risk of complete destruction. Once a man allowed a desire for the perfect to overcome him, he was lost. The passion would grow until it dominated him; until his sanity, his regard for all the reasonable joys of life, was drowned in one overwhelming lust for possession. . . .

'I dare say I shall stay a little longer,' he told Miss Crantock.

It may be that something in his tone had its effect upon her, or possibly she decided that her passion for dissection would find greater satisfaction in witnessing the encounter of Stephen and Margaret than in any further probing of him alone, for she dropped her air of banter as she said,—

'You know a woman finds it very difficult to understand just this *belle-à-faire-peur* business; but really men do seem to be quite literally afraid of a beautiful woman sometimes—as if she were somehow a dangerous creature.'

Stephen was relieved to hear his own vague thought expressed, but he was unable to make an articulate response.

'Do they?' he said.

'Well, if I may be permitted the personal instance,' Miss Crantock replied, '*you* rather gave me the impression of—funk.'

'Did I?' Stephen answered carelessly. He was vaguely aware that it was necessary for him to hide his true feelings, at any cost—even from himself. He had to deceive his own eyes; to seek in Margaret, flaws that did not exist, and to find them.

'Oh! well,' sighed Miss Crantock. 'If you won't, you won't, and there's an end of it. I suppose I

couldn't persuade you to give me a little more information about building, could I?'

Stephen might have agreed to that, if it were only to stop his companion's dissection, but before he could reply, the little group by the fireplace broke up and he realised that the moment of his trial was at hand. Cecilia and Margaret were coming towards him, and he braced himself to the act of defensive criticism.

'You remember Miss Weatherley, Stephen?' Cecilia was saying. 'She says she remembers you, so you ought to feel flattered. Though how she can pretend to have picked you out among all that crowd of dirty little boys, I don't know.' Then turning to Miss Crantock, she went on, 'Are you coming to tell me about that play, Nora? You'll stay to supper, won't you? There'll only be ourselves and Stephen and Margaret and her sister.'

That announcement and the thought of the coming ordeal that it foreshadowed, was completely occupying Stephen's attention. He had not heard Margaret's opening, and he missed her repetition of it, as he watched the departure of his mother and Miss Crantock. He would have liked to say at once that he had no intention of staying to supper, but that undertaking would have necessitated a considerable expenditure of nervous energy, and he had none to spare.

'Are you living in London now?' Margaret asked for the third time. 'Shall we sit down?'

'Yes, I am,' he said, addressing the open spaces of the room, and then finding that Margaret had seated herself on the Chesterfield from which Miss Crantock had just risen, he made an effort and sat down too.

'Yes, I've been living in London since last February,' he repeated.

'I thought I saw you waiting by the stage-door of

the Auditorium about a week ago?' Margaret continued lightly.

'Yes, I was waiting for my . . . for Mrs Threlfall,' he said.

Margaret dropped her voice discreetly. 'Oh! it isn't a secret from *me*,' she said. 'Of course I know that Cecilia is your mother. I remember her frightfully well, when she used to sing and tell stories at Medboro'. And although she mayn't believe it, I *do* remember you, too, at the King's School.'

He looked at her then in sheer amazement. He could not understand how she could possibly refer in this tone of calm detachment to that meeting of their spirits in the dining-room of the King's School. Yet neither in her face nor in her voice could he find the least hint of any consciousness that she had once beckoned him with an intimate smile, and that they were inevitably linked together by sharing this strange and perilous secret.

She misread, or chose to misread, his look of blank inquiry. 'But I see that you've completely forgotten,' she said, with an air of being prepared to forgive him.

'Forgotten? Me?' he asked in shocked astonishment. 'No, I think it must be you who's forgotten?' He was drowning and he knew it, and he was too bewildered to care. A man could only die once.

She raised her pretty eyebrows, looking straight into his eyes. 'But I've just told you that I remembered,' she said.

'Yes, but what?' he returned. 'Just having seen me?'

'What else was there to remember?' she asked. 'I'm sure I never spoke to you.'

An echo of Miss Crantock's comment came back to him. 'Oh! spoke to me, *no*,' he said.

She pretended complete innocence. 'Do tell me what I've forgotten,' she begged him.

He shook his head. 'Perhaps I made a mistake,' he said.

'Whatever it was, it seems to have been something very serious,' she remarked.

And quite suddenly it occurred to Stephen to wonder just how serious the effects of that smile had possibly been. Had not his grandfather asked on the fatal night of the elopement whether Stephen had fallen in love and if his mother knew it? And had he not, in fact, taken up a different attitude to his mother, as a consequence of that one slight intimation of Margaret's recognition? Cecilia might not have guessed that he was in love, but she had been aware of a change in him; and that intuition of hers might have been the deciding factor that finally tipped the delicate balance of her motives. Had she not said on the evening of that Saturday: 'Oh! you don't want *me* any more?'

'I wonder just how serious it was?' he said very gravely.

'But, really——' Margaret began in a more earnest tone, affected by his strange solemnity. 'I mean if I——' She sighed, and gave it up. 'Oh! what *do* you mean?' she concluded petulantly.

Never had she found a man so apparently disinclined to flirt with her; and she wanted to flirt with him. There was something about him that attracted her now, just as it had attracted her seven years ago.

Stephen realised that every postponement of his answer was increasing the significance of the impending disclosure. By the time it came, it would have the effect of an avowal. Was it possible that for the second time within seven days he was going to propose to a woman at his first meeting with her? He made a strong

effort to combat that absurd feeling he had of the transcending importance of this conversation. Nevertheless, he could not look at her as he spoke. He leaned a little forward with his hands between his knees, and stared down at the rose-pink carpet.

'Oh! it was nothing, really, nothing at all,' he said. 'But it did happen one day, the day before you went away from Medboro' on account of that scare of the measles, you remember——'

'I do. I had 'em,' she put in. 'Well?'

'It—it happened as you were going out of the dining-room you turned round and—and smiled. I don't suppose you were smiling at me, but at the time, I thought you were, and—and that's all, I think.'

'But why be so serious over it?' she asked.

'I thought you meant it—the smile—for me,' he said.

'I did,' she replied calmly.

'Why?' he asked.

'I had a romantic mind at fourteen,' she told him, 'and I thought it would be rather a delightful and desperate thing to smile at one of the boys. I chose you, because I liked the look of you more than any of the others. But I still don't see why you need make such a mystery of it all. Hasn't anybody smiled at you since?'

'I don't remember,' he replied, with a quiet sincerity that nearly scared her. If he were making love to her, it was a new method in her experience, and she was not sure that it might not be dangerous. If he were dreadfully in earnest—and his conversation rather implied that he was—he might upset the happy inconsequence of her life. At the same time, nothing was so fascinating as real danger, and she did not want to escape from it too soon.

'Funny sort of memory you must have,' she

commented. 'Can you only remember things that happened seven years ago?'

Stephen was about to reply when their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of his little half-brother, Chris. He had not been allowed to come down while the room was full of people. Cecilia complained that he was a nuisance, and that his father spoilt him in a way that was absolutely ridiculous. But he had come now to say good-night to his father and mother before he went to bed.

He was, at the age of six and a quarter, an interesting looking child. He had a rather long, thin face, with speculative, intent eyes under a mop of fair hair. All of his dress that was visible was a holland tunic and a pair of sandals. His thin legs were bare.

He entered the room with a quiet air of self-confidence, looked round, and then seeing Margaret made straight for her and climbed into her lap, ignoring completely the advances of his father.

'I've been expecting you for ages,' Margaret said. 'It's seven o'clock. Oughtn't you to be in bed by now?'

'Nurse wouldn't let me come till the people were gone,' he replied; 'an' I wouldn't go to bed without coming down. I knew you was here.' He was looking at Stephen with a slightly puzzled expression, as if trying to decide whether he was going to like him. Stephen's answering stare was almost absurdly similar in kind.

'Haven't you ever seen your brother before?' Margaret asked.

'Oh!' ejaculated Chris, with a slight start of surprise. 'Are you Stephen?'

Stephen nodded, with the beginning of a smile.

Chris held out his hand. 'I wondered when I was going to see you,' he said. 'Daddy says you're a builder,

and you'll show me how to build properly, better than he does. He doesn't build very well, you know. Would you like to come up and see my bricks now?'

'Yes, rather,' Stephen agreed, with instant enthusiasm. He leapt at this chance to escape! He flattered himself that he had kept his head remarkably well throughout his conversation with Margaret, but he felt the need for relaxation. Also, he was pleased by Chris's instant approval.

'You faithless little beggar,' Margaret put in. 'Why you haven't spoken to me yet.'

'Oh! you come too,' Chris said. 'I'll go and ask daddy if I mayn't sit up for another half an hour. Mother's sure to say "no," becoss of nurse. Come on.' Chris's prophecy was promptly fulfilled. Cecilia, indeed, seemed to be in a doubtful temper, and at once put her veto on a request which she seemed to have anticipated before it was made. 'It's Sunday, Christopher,' she said sharply, 'and nurse is sure to want to get off early.'

'Oh! *we'll* bath him and put him to bed,' Threlfall replied. 'And nurse shall get an extra half an hour by going now. We don't get a real live builder in the house every day, do we, Chris?'

Chris's face, however, did not respond to his father's delightful proposal. He was looking anxiously, timidly at his mother, awaiting her decision.

'Do let him, mother,' Stephen whispered.

Cecilia looked up at him with an immediate change of expression. 'We'll *all* come,' she said, with a laugh. 'Shall we all come and put you to bed, Chris?' she asked, turning to the child.

His face had suddenly cleared at her change of tone, and he made a quick little run over to her and clasped her skirts. 'You come too, mummy,' he said.

Cecilia bent down, lifted him in her arms, and carried

him out of the room. 'Come along, all of you,' she said gaily as she went. She carried him all the way up to the second floor.

Chris lay quite still in her arms, wearing an expression of perfect satisfaction.

3

In Chris's wide, airy, linoleum-floored nursery, the action resolved itself into an exhibition of building conducted by Stephen, with his little half-brother in ecstatic attendance. The others sat round and criticised according to their several abilities.

Chris's bricks were many and varied, ranging from a sackful of strong square wooden bricks to small and fanciful designs in German gothic made of coloured composition.

'He's mad on building at present,' Cecilia explained. 'He wants to stop every time we pass a place where there's building going on, and watch.'

'You shall come and see *my* building. It's ever such a big one,' Stephen whispered to his vivacious assistant. 'Oo!' murmured Chris, a little overcome by the abundance of delight that was being showered upon him.

The building which bore a remote resemblance to the technical schools at Leicester, progressed rapidly, but it was just upon eight o'clock before the last available piece of material had been used in the construction of a superfluous and dangerously unstable campanile. Chris walked round and round this rococo erection with round eyes of wonder.

'Now knock it all down,' Stephen suggested. He was self-conscious about his handiwork and not at all proud of it.

Chris stared at him in amazement. 'Oh! no!'

he said. 'I'm going to leave it here all night, so as I can see it again first thing when I get up to-morrow morning. Will you tell nurse, daddy, that she mustn't knock it down. She will, if you don't tell her.'

Threlfall promised.

'You won't forget,' Chris insisted. 'You know you do forget things sometimes.'

'I'm afraid I do,' his father admitted, 'but I won't forget this.'

'And now, Chris,' Cecilia put in, 'you must really go to bed at once. Who do you want to bath you? We can't all do it, you know.'

Until then, it had been almost inconceivable to Stephen that the child could ever be naughty. He had appeared to be everything that was docile and charming; and Stephen had found himself wondering what his mother could possibly have meant by her hints of Chris's ill-temper and unruliness. But at this question as to whom he should choose to bath him, the child showed a new side of himself. His expression became sly and cunning, he looked out of the corners of his eyes, and began to strut jauntily round the circle of candidates, as if rejoicing in the exercise of his power. He was playing a game, but he seemed to be playing it with deliberate cruelty.

His father was the first to offer himself. 'Come along, old boy. I promised to do it,' he said, holding out his hands.

Chris rejected that offer with an insulting nonchalance. 'I can have you any night,' he said.

Threlfall shrugged his shoulders and laughed, but he did not completely disguise his chagrin.

'Let me bath you, darling,' Margaret put in quickly.

Chris halted before her for a moment, with his hands on his hips, then passed her by with a roguish chuckle.

'Come, dear, if you don't make up your mind soon,

I shall have to send Anna up to put you to bed,' Cecilia said.

Chris looked at her slyly. 'I won't have Anna,' he said.

'Well, then, will you have me?' his mother asked.

Chris eyed her thoughtfully, with an effect of subtle calculation.

'I'll have——' he said. 'I'll have . . . I'll have Stephen.' But he kept his gaze fixed on his mother as he spoke.

'Nonsense, dear, Stephen can't bath you,' Cecilia returned. 'He has never bathed any one in his life.'

'I don't mind trying,' Stephen murmured, but his voice was drowned in Chris's sudden protest.

'I *will* have Stephen,' he shouted defiantly. 'I *will*. I *will*.'

Cecilia shrugged her shoulders and looked across at Threlfall. Her expression said plainly enough, 'Well, is he to have his own way or not?'

'Oh! Lord, you must settle it,' Threlfall said, and got up and left the room.

'Poor Christopher! He can't stand a row,' Cecilia apologised.

'Why not let me try?' Stephen volunteered. 'You could superintend, you know.'

'No. No. I want you all by yourself,' Chris proclaimed.

That last piece of self-assertion decided Cecilia. She had evidently been willing to make some concession, if only, it may be, in recognition of Chris's appeal to her in the drawing-room and their moment of love and sympathy on the stairs. But now he was defying her, vaunting his independence, telling her in so many words that she did not hold the first place in his affections.

She got up with a quick determined movement, and

Chris, anticipating her intention, dodged instantly behind Stephen's building. Cecilia, following him up, flicked the unstable campanile with her skirts and brought it down with a rattling crash.

Chris turned for an instant to this awful disaster, with the tremulous mouth of a child on the verge of tears; then he faced his mother in a white heat of anger.

'You did it on purpose,' he challenged her.

Cecilia had paused instinctively when the tower fell, but she had not relinquished her original purpose. 'No, dear, I didn't. It was quite an accident,' she said coldly. 'Now come along at once, without any more fuss.'

And to Stephen's surprise, Chris quietly submitted. He allowed Cecilia to take his hand and lead him away without another word. Yet as the two left the nursery they seemed to express by their very movements a cold and bitter hatred of each other.

'It'll be all right, Chris,' Stephen called after him. 'I'll have it all built up again before you come back.'

Chris did not respond to this promise, but Stephen set to work at once to reconstruct his tower on a firmer foundation. He worked for the first two or three minutes to the accompaniment of Miss Crantock's analysis of the situation.

She seemed to be primarily addressing Grace Weatherley, a fair, tall girl, with an intellectual face. She was two years younger than Margaret and supposed to be unusually clever.

'Dear Cecilia can't stand opposition,' Miss Crantock was saying, 'and she and Chris are altogether too much alike to get on together. They clash, they're bound to clash. They love each other to distraction one minute and hate each other the next.'

'He's always so good with me,' Margaret's voice gently protested.

'Of course, he'll be good with any one who'll give him their whole attention and admiration,' Miss Crantock's firm voice continued. 'And when it's just a question of entertaining him, it's all easy enough. But there must inevitably be occasions, like this one, when you can't be content to consult a child's inclination . . .'

Stephen, patiently rebuilding his tower, thought that Miss Crantock was very much inclined to put everything in the plainest possible terms. She wanted to get all the material of life sharp and clear, ready for immediate translation to the stage. But he knew Cecilia better than Miss Crantock ever could, and he knew that the scene he had just witnessed had its origin in experiences and emotions of which Miss Crantock was completely ignorant. He was so deep in his thought of the past, and of the differences between himself as a boy and this delicately poised, too closely-bred child of his mother's middle age, that he was startled when he heard a soft voice at his elbow saying, 'I suppose you wouldn't let me help you?'

'Oh! it's getting on all right, thanks,' he replied gruffly.

He was pleased to find that he had been able, if only for three or four minutes, to forget Margaret while she was actually in the same room with him. His pride in that achievement, however, was short-lived. Margaret, no doubt, had been aware of his distraction, and having tasted the delights of danger downstairs, she was not ready to relinquish them too soon.

She sat down beside him on the floor and watched his deft, steady movements. She felt quite safe under the keen, analytical eye of Miss Crantock.

'You really do do it awfully well,' she commented. 'I suppose a knowledge of real building does help?'

'I suppose it does, in a way,' Stephen admitted.

'I should like to see your real building,' Margaret continued adventurously. 'Where is it?'

'On the Embankment,' Stephen said, without looking up from his work. 'There isn't much of it yet. Just a big hole in the ground and a very tall crane.'

'One of those things on three gigantic legs, like Mr Wells's Martians?' Margaret asked. 'I should love to go to the top of one of those things. Could I?'

'You'd have to be hauled up in the bucket,' Stephen said. 'It's no joke the first time.'

'Oh! but I should *love* it,' Margaret protested. 'Would you really take me one day?'

Stephen saw a vivid picture of himself and Margaret in that bucket, momentarily alone together in mid-air. He paused in the act of adjusting the finial to his re-erected tower. His hand was trembling and he was afraid to expose his weakness.

'Let me do it,' Margaret said. 'Isn't it quite in the middle?'

'Oh! it'll do all right, thanks.' Stephen stood up as he spoke. 'He ought to be back in a minute, oughtn't he?' he added.

'Chris? Yes, I should think so,' Margaret replied, still kneeling before the tower. 'But you haven't said yet whether you'll take me up to the top of your crane.'

'If you'd really like to go, I will,' Stephen mumbled.

'When is the best time to come?' she asked.

'Oh! any time. Not between twelve and one. And I'm sometimes out in the afternoon,' he said.

She was trying to make him look at her, but he kept his gaze steadily on the finial of his own tower. What he saw was the great bucket of the derrick hovering between earth and sky. Could he ask Bennett to take her up?

'Any particular day?' she persisted.

'I'm there every day,' he said. 'We knock off at twelve o'clock on Saturdays.'

'You're quite sure it won't be a bother?'

'Quite sure.'

Margaret was probably not at the end of her questions even then, but Chris's return in his dressing-gown relieved Stephen from further agony. He wanted passionately to look at her and dared not. He believed that if he looked, he must inevitably betray himself. He was so poignantly aware of her that he felt as if his glance would convey the intimacy of an actual contact. He turned with a feeling of positive relief to greet his little brother.

'I've built it stronger this time,' he said.

Chris, however, gave no manifestation of delight at the appearance of the re-erected campanile. 'Thank you,' he said demurely. 'It looks stronger. Will you tell father not to forget about telling nurse. I'm going to bed now.'

He said good-night, still with the same demure, pre-occupied manner, to the three women, and not even the attempted blandishment of Margaret could arouse him to any response. But when that duty was done, he returned to Stephen and said, with a faint flicker of excitement, 'Would you like to come and put me to bed and tell me a story? Mother said I might ask you.'

Stephen agreed willingly. He had a queer feeling of pity for Chris, the kind of feeling he might have had for some one who had been hopelessly disappointed in love. And he wanted to comfort him.

'I'm jealous, Chris,' Margaret said.

Chris smiled tepidly, as if she had made a rather poor joke.

As Stephen was led out of the nursery he heard Miss

Crantock saying, 'You see, he meant to get his own way somehow, and he got it.'

Chris heard too, and looked up with suddenly bright eyes at Stephen. 'I did, didn't I?' he said triumphantly.

Stephen found something a little uncanny in this deliberate plotting by a child of six.

The story-telling, however, proved a great success, and Stephen was late for supper.

4

Old Edwardes appeared at supper. He had excused himself from the 'At Home' on the ground that he was getting too old for a crowd. And after they went up into the drawing-room, he and Stephen drifted into a corner together and remained there for the greater part of the evening. They had a common impulse to isolate themselves; the old man because he found that society tired him, the young one because he only dared to look at Margaret from a safe distance.

Cecilia made no attempt to entice them out of their seclusion, but now and again she glanced in their direction and favoured them with a tolerant smile. Stephen was glad that she should not interfere with him, equally glad that she did not resent his withdrawal. Nevertheless he wondered if she had any particular motive in permitting it. He was, he found, unusually alert in his observation of her moods. He had a sense of having behaved badly to her; and he was sure that she would not approve of that appointment with Margaret at the works.

Presently Threlfall went to the piano and began to play some new music he had just discovered, and afterwards Margaret sang. She had a pleasant voice,

with a limited compass and not much power; but very true and sweet.

And while she was singing Stephen completely surrendered himself, although the very completeness of his surrender put her farther away from him than ever. He yielded himself with sorrow and a sense of final abandonment, approaching the idea of love with the certainty that for him it must mean immolation. Yet there were moments in which the thought of absolute sacrifice presented itself as a solution of all difficulties. He pictured for himself a lifetime of devotion, seeking for no return. He saw her married to some unrealised husband, the mother of children, and himself silently, distantly adoring her as the perfect ideal, cherishing her image in his outer solitude. That solution was, indeed, an infinitely sad one, but was at least free from bitterness or frustration; and the sadness had a quality of ecstasy. In imagination he resisted with consummate ease the most urgent temptation to lure him from his ascetic worship.

All the shape of that fantasy was due, no doubt, to the influence of the music, but the effect of it persisted and calmed him until the end of the evening. Old Edwardes was nodding, and Stephen was not called upon to shatter the delicate texture of his dream by making conversation. The mood, indeed, might have lasted until he met Margaret again, had it not been that another human being intruded violently into his field of vision and destroyed the pattern of his thought.

The car had come for Margaret and her sister; they had said good-bye—Margaret with a brief parting reminder to Stephen, concerning her visit to the works—and gone out of the room, when Cecilia suddenly snatched a piece of music from the piano, and said to Stephen.

'Oh! take this down to them, dear; I promised they

should have it. Make haste; they haven't gone, we should have heard the car start.'

And not until Stephen saw the grouping of Margaret and Threlfall in the hall did he realise that the latter had left the drawing-room.

In itself, their attitude was not compromising, and they did not move apart when Stephen came into view at the bend of the stairs. But the sight of them standing there so close together instantly presented to him a new and brilliantly illuminating aspect of the whole situation, so far as his mother was concerned. It was incredible that Threlfall could be making love to Margaret, yet incredible as it was, Stephen accepted it from that moment as a fact. He remembered Cecilia's tone and expression as she had appealed to her husband's judgment in the question of Margaret's beauty. He remembered Threlfall's slightly embarrassed reply. He found an explanation of Cecilia's action in sending him down with the probably unnecessary song.

And in one swift moment of realisation, Stephen knew that he hated Threlfall, had always hated him. He had robbed him of his mother seven years ago, and now, once more, he appeared as the thief and the seducer. In that moment vanished, also, Stephen's chaste resolves, made under the influence of Margaret's singing. He had been willing then to surrender the unattainable to some imaginary lover, but he found himself passionately unwilling to surrender her to Christopher Threlfall. In that violent reaction Stephen may still have seen himself in the character of the impersonal deliverer, but he was quite definitely resolved that he would save her.

Something of that resolve must have been visible in his face and manner as he came quietly down the stairs, for Threlfall turned to him with an impatient frown.

'Hallo! Stephen,' he said. 'Are you going already?'

'No, my mother sent me down with this song for Miss Weatherley,' Stephen replied, his voice and expression consciously mimicking his rival's.

'Song?' queried Margaret sweetly.

'She said she had promised it to you,' Stephen explained.

'Oh! thanks so much,' Margaret said, accepting the proffered score and leaving it delightfully uncertain whether or not she had remembered the promise in question.

Threlfall was leaning against the hall table. 'That's all right,' he said in a tone of dismissal.

Stephen, however, refused to go; though he had, obviously, nothing further to say.

'I'll come out to the car with you,' Threlfall said to Margaret.

She had so far worn an air of hesitation, as if she realised the true meaning of this potentially dramatic situation, but was unable to make any personal decision. And when Threlfall spoke she seemed to run away from this demand for exercising and displaying her choice rather than from either of the two men who were soliciting her favour.

'Oh! no, please don't,' she said breathlessly; and she had slipped out of the hall door and closed it something too definitely behind her before Threlfall could protest. It would have been undignified to follow her, and he had not the temperament that can forget appearances. He proved that by his immediate treatment of Stephen.

'Coming upstairs again?' he asked, with a smile that dismissed the short scene in the hall as the most trivial of incidents.

Stephen had not the same powers of recovery. 'I don't know,' he said sulkily. 'I haven't said good-night.'

'Come along, then,' Threlfall replied, almost gaily, and led the way upstairs.

Stephen followed him with a feeling of having been ingeniously thwarted.

5

As he walked home to Camberwell he tried to get everything quite clear in his mind in the light of the recent revelation. He found, however, that nothing was clear except the certainty that he must save both Margaret and Cecilia from the disaster of Threlfall's furtive, and, as Stephen saw it, quite dastardly amorousness. The thought of that made him furious. He could not compare it with the now forgiven infidelity of Cecilia seven years earlier. He saw this threatened treachery of Threlfall's as some kind of absolute, a veritable sin against the Holy Ghost. His mind swayed vehemently between his condemnations of the infidelity to Cecilia and the threat to Margaret. And each of these aspects aggravated the wickedness of the other. He was so sure of the rectitude of his judgment that it never occurred to him that he might be jealous.

Chapter Six

I

STEPHEN had to endure more than two days' inactivity before he was granted any opportunity to begin his active interference with the base schemes of his step-father. Mr Dickinson had come up to town on Monday morning and he kept Stephen even more busy than usual until late on Tuesday evening.

He had had a qualm of uneasiness when his employer appeared unexpectedly at the Embankment works. His first thought had been of the possibility of Margaret's visit that same morning, and he had had something of the feeling of a schoolboy in fear of disgrace. Afterwards, as he and James Dickinson went over the building, he had realised the absurdity of his fear. If she came, it would not matter. There was no reason why he should not invite people to see the works, especially such appropriate and probable people as the Weatherleys. Nevertheless, he hoped that Margaret would not come while Mr Dickinson was there.

Stephen was down in the basement on Wednesday morning when Bennett came to inform him that there was 'a young lady in the office asking after him.' Bennett's manner simply bristled with tact as he made the announcement. He might have been warning Stephen that there was a warrant out against him.

'What had I better say, Mr Kirkwood?' he asked, as if he were quite willing to abet Stephen's escape if necessary.

'Is it Miss Weatherley, do you know?' Stephen

said, as coolly as he could. Now that his hour had come, he would willingly have postponed it.

'She didn't give no name,' replied the conspiratorial Bennett. 'She's a very good-looking young lady, with dark eyes, and she just came in and arst for you.'

'All right. I'll come up,' Stephen said, and added, by way of self-defence, 'It's Miss Weatherley, the daughter of Dr Weatherley who used to be at the King's School. I—I met her the other day and she wants to go up in the crane to see the view. I suppose I can take her up in the bucket?'

Bennett rubbed his chin, looking rather shocked. 'We been loadin' joists all the mornin',' he said thoughtfully. 'P'raps I'd better 'ave the bucket rubbed round. You don't think as she'll be frightened, Mr Kirkwood?'

Stephen shrugged his shoulders with a pretence of indifference. 'I'll come up,' he repeated. 'Yes, you might see that the bucket's fairly clean, will you?'

As he climbed up from the basement he realised that his mistake had been in promising to take Margaret on the crane. This was why he had had that sense of wrong-doing under the eye of Mr Dickinson. It was perfectly reasonable and right to take occasional visitors over the works, but this other affair was just a lark, and the men could only regard it as such.

Stephen entered the office with a stern determination to dissuade Margaret from the adventure.

She greeted him with a touch of nervousness. 'I've come, you see, Mr Kirkwood,' she said, offering him her hand. 'I hope I haven't chosen a bad time? Am I a nuisance?'

He was glad that she was wearing gloves. He had come straight into the office from climbing a thirty-foot ladder, and he knew that his own hands were soiled and gritty. 'Oh! no, it's quite a good time,'

he said, 'but I'm afraid there's nothing much to see yet.' He had a wild hope that if he made no reference to the crane, she might be glad of an excuse to postpone her adventure.

Her answer left him in no doubt about her attitude towards that side of the entertainment.

'Well, I didn't really come to see anything to-day, did I?' she returned. 'Unless it was the view of London. You promised to take me up to the top of nowhere in a bucket, didn't you? I don't know why it should sound so much more prosaic than a broomstick, but it does.'

Stephen frowned. 'You're quite sure you want to?' he asked.

'Quite sure,' she affirmed confidently, although she was unquestionably nervous and excited. 'I mean to go up in an aeroplane the first chance I get, so this will be a kind of preparation.'

Still Stephen hesitated. He wished now that he had entered into a league with Bennett. He might so easily have arranged to receive a message that the crane was out of order, or something. But even as the thought crossed his mind, he saw through the open door the great shape of the bucket drawing up from the basement, lifting and threading its way with a deliberate and solemn certainty towards the platform in front of the office.

Margaret caught the direction of his glance, and joined him by the door. 'Is this it coming?' she asked, with a little break in her voice, and laid her hand on his arm as if for support.

'There's no earthly reason why you should go, if you'd sooner not,' Stephen said. But he had changed his mind again. He wanted now to go up with her in that great iron receptacle which was already almost at their feet; he wanted to be, if only for so short a space

of time, her support and protector. He did not care what the workmen thought or said.

'No, no, I wouldn't sooner not,' she protested eagerly. 'You *will* take me, won't you?'

He nodded quickly. 'All right, wait one moment,' he said. 'I'll just get one of the office chairs for you to get down by, and, I say, do you want to go as high as we can?'

'Please,' she said breathlessly.

'Very well, I'll just tell the engineer,' Stephen replied, with the same effect of haste. 'We've got a telephone up to him from the office.'

He returned in a few seconds carrying the chair. The bucket had paused with its upper edge some couple of feet higher than the platform in front of the office, and now hung, slowly swaying and turning, with an appearance of vast and turgid deliberation.

Stephen lowered his chair into it. 'Just for you to climb down by,' he explained, 'and it'll be useful to stand on when you want to get the view. You'll hardly be able to see over the edge when you're standing on the bottom of the thing.'

Margaret looked up at the great jib of the crane that now hung almost horizontally above them. The wire rope seemed to dwindle into a mere thread before it reached that distantly supporting beam. And far away on the top of the staging she could just discern the tiny figure of the watching engineer, to whom she was about to entrust her destiny. Then, as the contrivance slowly turned past her, she boldly laid her hand on the sloping chain of the suspending apparatus stepped up on to the iron rim before her and climbed lightly down, first on to the chair and thence to the bottom of the bucket.

'All right,' Stephen shouted up to the staging, and

putting his hand on the edge of the bucket vaulted in beside her with a single movement.

Far away in the sky she heard the racket of the engine that was taking her away from earth, and looking up she could see the staging slowly falling down to her, and the raw heads of the processional steel stanchions dipping below the limits of her small horizon.

'We're swinging a bit, not much,' said the quiet voice of her companion. 'We shall steady up as we go higher and the cable gets shorter.'

'How high are we going?' Margaret asked. She had had a moment of intense trepidation as they started, but now all sense of fear had left her. She found herself suddenly lifted out of the world and utterly alone, as it seemed, with this quiet, commanding man, who had authority over a whole army of workmen. It was certainly a great adventure, but it no longer seemed to her dangerous. The clatter of the engine had come nearer, but now she could see nothing above her but a rapidly shortening length of cable, and the great arm of the derrick that had an effect of peering down at them inquisitively.

'Well, as high as we can get,' Stephen said. 'When we've run as near as we can to the pulley, the man will raise the jib till it's nearly upright. When we stop you can get up on the chair and look over.'

Margaret smiled at him with a charming air of companionship. 'Ripping of you to let me come!' she said.

Stephen hastily diverted the conversation from that topic. He could not tell her that he was willing to risk his situation or his life to gratify her whim; and nothing less than that statement could adequately express him.

'We're up to the pulley,' he said awkwardly. 'Now the jib will begin to rise.'

As he spoke, the new movement began, and it seemed to Margaret that she and the bucket and that inquisitive nose of the derrick were all going straight up into the sky together, while the crane's great arm was slowly following, dipping and approaching them.

'How big it is,' she commented, observing this approach. 'And it looks such a delicate thing from below.'

Stephen nodded and glanced with a touch of anxiety at the now almost vertical jib. They were high enough. If they went any farther the bucket would begin to tip. He hoped the engineer was not going to play any of his larks. You never knew with these chaps. He would not have cared for himself. They had tried these tricks on him before, and had never yet succeeded in scaring him. But it was a different matter with Margaret. He must call down and tell him to stop. Without a second thought he laid hold of the rim of the bucket and pulled himself with a quick, easy lift to a sitting posture on the edge.

The engineer, however, was not up to any of his larks, and his engine had already stopped.

'It's all right now,' Stephen said, looking down at Margaret. 'Do you feel like standing up on the chair and looking round?'

He was surprised to see that all the colour had gone from her face.

'You're not frightened?' he asked. 'Do you want to go down again?'

'No, no. I'm all right,' she said. 'I'll climb up. You gave me such a shock when you jumped up on to the edge like that. I—I thought you were going over. Do be careful. Is it safe to sit there?'

Stephen smiled reassuringly. Until she had put this question he had not thought of 'showing off.' Now he became conscious that his complete disregard

of heights might assume in her eyes an aspect of courage.

'Oh! this is safe enough,' he said. 'I've never been giddy yet. You have to get used to heights in this trade.'

But Margaret still hesitated to climb up on to the chair. The sight of him there, poised on the rim of the bucket, gave her a feeling of insecurity.

'It's awfully silly of me,' she apologised. 'But would you mind holding on to that chain?'

He obeyed her at once, and if she had needed any further confirmation of his perfect indifference to fear, she would have found it in this instant compliance with her wish. The braggart would have refused doubting his own courage and seeking further opportunity to prove it.

Margaret caught her breath with a little gasp when she took her first sight of the world she had left below her. She had not anticipated quite that effect she received of hanging perilously over the solid fabric of neighbouring roofs and chimneys. The tall building across the road was near enough to lead her eyes down to the cañon of the narrow street, busy with the traffic of tiny, foreshortened humanity, of unexpectedly oblong little carts and bolster-backed horses.

She lifted her head from that scrutiny and shut her eyes, clutching the red rim of her cage with both hands.

'Giddy?' Stephen asked, anxiously watching her.

'Just for a minute,' she said. 'I'll be all right in a moment.'

'You can't fall out, you know,' he comforted her.

'I know I can't,' she said, 'but I felt as if I simply must throw myself down. I'm getting better now. It is a wonderful view, isn't it?'

'Pretty good,' he admitted. 'But it's too hazy to

see far to-day. You ought to come here just before rain.'

She schooled herself to look about her, staring down over the trees on the Embankment, at the dwarfed procession of Blackfriars Bridge.

'We've got an audience,' her companion remarked.

'An audience?' she repeated. She wished he wouldn't talk. She believed that she could manage quite well if he would leave her alone.

'Quite a crowd of people watching us from the Embankment,' he said.

As he spoke he moved his position to indicate the crowd he had mentioned; and the iron receptacle which was, for the time being, Margaret's only link with the solid earth, sluggishly swayed.

She gripped the rim of it in a panic, and then, with a slight feeling of sickness, compelled herself to look down at the stippling of pink faces that stared up at her from the remote background of the distant pavement.

That feat, however, was the limit of her endurance.

'I think I should like to go back now,' she said, and climbed down with a thankful sense of recovered safety into the blindness afforded by the walls of the bucket.

Stephen still maintained his seat on the rim, leaning over now and shouting down his instructions to the engineer.

Margaret crouched in her chair and kept her gaze on the iron floor below her. She was aware of their movement, of the creak of the jib, the faint grind of the cable, and a sense of steady falling, but none of these things affected her so long as she did not look up.

She was surprised when her cicerone's voice hailed her cheerfully with the announcement, 'Here we are. Hold on a minute. We've got rather a swing on. I'll try and steady her before you get out.'

She looked up to see him hanging resistantly on to one of the chains that connected bucket and cable, and being dragged along the platform despite all his efforts to counteract the slow swing of the enormous pendulum. Once or twice the bucket bumped against the edge of the platform, with the deep powerful thud of a vessel against a pier.

'All right now,' Stephen panted. 'Can I help you?'

She was glad to take the hand he held out; and when she had safely gained the platform she grasped the comforting solidity of his firm arm. Her legs were trembling, and the flooring under her feet seemed to be oscillating with the slow deliberate swing of that horrible bucket.

'Come into the office and sit down for a few minutes,' Stephen said.

2

Her giddiness passed almost immediately and gave place to a feeling of exhilaration.

'I'm tremendously glad I went,' she said, sitting on the edge of the office table and swinging her feet. 'It was a great adventure.'

Stephen surreptitiously wiped his hands on the inside of his coat-pockets. He was still warm from his struggle with the pendulum.

'I'm afraid it made you a bit dizzy,' he said.

'Yes, it did,' she admitted. 'But that's quite gone now, and I feel as if I'd discovered the North Pole or something. It isn't everybody who has been up to the very top of a thing like that, is it? I shall boast about it for weeks.'

'It's just possible,' he said, 'that you're the first woman who has ever done it. I've never heard of any other woman doing it before.'

'And you think simply nothing of it,' she commented, on a note of intense admiration.

'Used to it, you see,' he explained.

'But you weren't always used to it,' she said. 'Weren't you dizzy, at first—on scaffoldings and things?'

Stephen searched his memory. 'I don't remember,' he said. 'I suppose I've always had a good head for heights. I remember going up the tower of the cathedral at Medboro' when I was about ten, and sitting on the battlements.'

'I suppose boys are different,' she concluded; but she was thinking less of the difference between the sexes in this matter of a 'head for heights' than of the remarkable difference between Stephen and all the other men she knew.

'Well, I'm interrupting your work,' she continued. 'I ought to be going, oughtn't I?'

'It's all right,' Stephen mumbled. 'The men have knocked off for the dinner hour. The whistle went while we were up on the derrick.'

It may have been 'all right' as he had said, but Margaret found that she had nothing more to say. They had come to the crisis of an embarrassed, and, as it seemed, a significant pause. It was as if they had but just realised the fact that they were there and talking to each other.

'The dinner-hour?' ejaculated Margaret, clutching at an excuse. 'Then I must be getting back on my own account, if not on yours. It was frightfully good of you to take me up, Mr Kirkwood. I've really enjoyed it immensely, although I *was* so silly as to get giddy. Thank you ever so much for taking such a lot of bother.'

She had got down from the table and was talking herself out of the office. Stephen followed her quietly to open the door in the hoarding that gave on to the

street. And when she reached the safety of the busy pavement again, the courage that had so unexpectedly deserted her, returned and prompted her to say.

'Won't you come to see us in Bryanston Square some time? I'm sure my father would be glad if you would. He's very keen on talking to his old pupils. We know quite a lot.'

'Thanks, I should like to,' Stephen said.

She held out her hand and smiled as she said 'Good-bye.'

He took her hand as if it had been made of egg-shell china.

She left him confirmed in her opinion that he was different from any other man she had ever met. She had been fully aware of the provocative quality of her smile. Any other man would, at least, have pressed her hand.

Stephen watched her until she turned the corner into Tudor Street, but she did not look back. He was being very stern and determined with himself. He had no intention of permitting himself to be encouraged either by her condescension in visiting the works, or by the thrilling intimacy of her smile. He was quite sure that he was not going to be foolish about her. He was in love with her, of course. He could not deny that. But only in the hopeless, infatuated way, in which a clerk might be in love with a society beauty whose photograph he had seen in a weekly paper. He meant to keep that fact clearly before him; and saw no reason why he should not allow himself to worship her presence whenever opportunity offered. He would, for instance, accept that invitation to Bryanston Square.

A single word of a conversation he overheard as he returned to the office, stiffened him still further in his determination to keep himself well in hand. Gray, his junior clerk, was talking to Bennett as Stephen

approached, and he caught the one word, 'sparkler.' He had no doubt as to its application. Every man on the place was probably discussing the same subject at this moment; and in their several manners of speech most of them would attempt some variant of Gray's epithet. And it was just this aspect of her that he must never allow himself to forget. In this even, dull world, that smelt of mortar and stone and rusty iron, a world that was harsh, hard, and sour; she—sparkled. She was rare and exotic, destined to sit and rule in the high select places of society. He must, before all things, remember that; he must never let her imagine by any word or sign that he ever aspired to do more than adore her from a respectful distance. He could do that, and still protect her from the infamies of Christopher Threlfall.

3

Stephen went to see his mother the following evening.

This was his first visit since Sunday and he inferred from her greeting that she considered herself neglected. He decided to put that matter right at once.

'Mr Dickinson has been up in town this week,' he began, as soon as he had sat down. 'And I've had a pretty thick time. He took me out to dinner on Monday, and on Tuesday I didn't get home till after nine.'

Cecilia sighed wearily and leaned back in her chair. She had received him in her own little sitting-room on the second floor, and had already confessed to being tired.

'And Wednesday?' she asked carelessly.

'Well, I was fairly late getting home; it was after eight, and I felt too fagged to go out again,' he explained.

'I suppose you had a lot of lost time to make up,' she suggested.

'Not that I know of,' he said. 'Why lost time, mother?'

'Taking your visitor up on the crane, and so on,' Cecilia replied, with an air of weary disgust.

'Oh! that! How did you know?' Stephen asked, attempting a smile and trying very hard not to be at all embarrassed.

'She was here this afternoon,' Cecilia said. 'She left a note for you.'

Stephen instinctively suppressed his desire to clamour for an immediate sight of this astounding treasure.

'Oh! And she told you all about it, did she?' he asked, with a covert glance at the mantelpiece.

Cecilia nodded, and put her hand up to her eyes. 'The note is over there on my bureau,' she said, as if the mere effort of speaking were too much for her. 'For Heaven's sake, get it and read it. I shall never have your attention until that's done with, and I want to talk to you.'

'I—there's no hurry about the note,' Stephen returned stoically, convinced in his own mind that he was carrying the thing off very well. 'What do you want to talk to me about, mother?'

She was still covering her eyes with her right hand, and waved her left vaguely in the direction of the bureau, without speaking.

Stephen pretended to accept the gesture as a command and got up and went over to the bureau with an effect of amused submission to her whim.

The note lay on the blotting pad, addressed in a rather girlish hand to 'Stephen Kirkwood, Esq.,' and he hesitated a moment before he opened it. If he had been alone, he would have hesitated still longer. He would have liked to turn the envelope over in his hands, and

gaze at it as at some inestimable treasure, before he violated its perfection by the brutal strength of his rough fingers.

The contents of the note were very simple, and it had apparently been written in haste. It ran:—

‘DEAR MR KIRKWOOD,—My father tells me that one of your old schoolfellows, Mr Fletton Hall, is coming to tea with us on Saturday. Won’t you come and meet him?

‘Yours sincerely,

‘MARGARET WEATHERLEY.’

Stephen carefully replaced the letter in the envelope and put it in his breast pocket.

‘There’s a waste-paper basket over there if you want one,’ Cecilia’s voice said maliciously.

‘I’m keeping it for the sake of the address,’ Stephen replied, although there was no address given in Margaret’s note. ‘Miss Weatherley has asked me to go to tea there on Saturday to meet young Hall—Fletton Hall, she calls him. I suppose that’s secundus, his initials were R. F.’

He was puzzled by some unplaced association with the complete name, Fletton Hall; some association of recent date that had nothing to do with the King’s School.

Cecilia, however, was not interested in young Hall.

‘Shall you go?’ she asked.

Stephen returned to the chair opposite his mother. He was no longer afraid of her possible scrutiny. He had a feeling of unexpected security, of being able to talk of Miss Weatherley and her invitation without embarrassment.

‘I expect so,’ he said, with a nonchalance that displayed but the smallest hint of exaggeration. ‘I

should like to see Dr Weatherley again—and young Hall.'

'And Margaret?' queried Cecilia.

'Oh! yes, I should like to see her again too,' he admitted boldly. 'She's awfully pretty, of course.'

Cecilia threw off her air of lassitude, and sat up in one of her characteristic attitudes, suddenly alert, a little strained.

'I suppose you realise what you're doing, Stephen?' she said. 'You realise, I mean, that there's no chance of your marrying her?'

He had affirmed that fact to himself often enough, but it shocked him to hear it stated by his mother.

'Of course I do,' he said, without conviction.

'I'm not maligning her, you know,' Cecilia went on quickly. 'I think she's quite a nice little thing in some ways, but she has had her head turned by too much admiration. From all kinds of men—quite celebrated men, some of them.'

'Yes,' Stephen agreed uncomfortably. He was thinking of his stepfather, and did not like to look up at his mother, lest she should guess his thought.

'Christopher is quite silly about her,' Cecilia continued, ruthlessly thrusting aside all obstacles.

'Dr Threlfall?' Stephen tried feebly.

She dismissed that evasion with silent contempt. 'Had you guessed that?' she asked.

'Do you mean——?' he began, but she interrupted him impatiently.

'There's no need to quibble, my dear boy,' she said. 'I'm not jealous. In fact, I should be quite glad if Margaret would lead him on a little. It would do him good to find out at the end that she's not in the least in love with him. For she isn't. It may be a dreadful shock to Christopher when he finds out, but she thinks of him as quite an old man. She admires him, thinks

him quite handsome, no doubt, but she would be horrified if he really made love to her——'

'Do you believe she would?' Stephen put in anxiously.

'Why do you ask me like that?' she returned sharply; and then, as he hesitated to reply, she said, 'Have you seen anything?'

'No, no, I haven't,' he protested.

'What were they doing last Sunday night, when you took that song down?' she asked.

'Nothing,' Stephen said.

'Then why do you think she is in love with him?' Cecilia persisted.

'I don't,' Stephen replied.

'But you think she might be?'

'How can I possibly tell, mother?' he defended himself.

'I wish you would tell me what it was you saw last Sunday night, that made you suspicious,' she said, returning to the real point of her attack.

Stephen could not resist the pressure of her determination. He got out of his chair and began to walk up and down the little length of the boudoir. He remembered, with a sense of re-living the past, how he had in almost exactly the same way tried to avoid his sister's pertinent inquiries about his mother in the room over the shop in Long Causeway.

'I didn't see anything,' he said. 'But they were standing rather close together as I turned the corner of the stairs, and I guessed all of a sudden that there might be something. They weren't a bit confused or anything of that sort; but you'd put the idea into my head the first night I came here, and then I thought it might be possible that——'

'She isn't,' Cecilia declared. 'But apparently *you* are.' She disregarded the too ingenuous 'What?' that he inevitably interpolated, continuing rapidly,

'But I don't want you to be spoiled, Stephen. I don't want you to fall head over ears in love with her, and make yourself utterly miserable. She isn't worth it. No woman is, unless she is willing to give herself up body and soul. And I don't fancy that Margaret is one of that sort.'

She had but repeated his own argument in another form, but instead of stiffening him, her speech gave him an odd pleasure. This open discussion of the possibility of his falling in love with Margaret, brought with it a heartening air of reality. It is true that Cecilia's recognition of the probabilities still left Margaret hopelessly beyond his reach, but it no longer seemed a vain absurdity for him to adore her openly. He felt that he had been given a licence to worship her without disguising his emotion even from herself.

'I know, mother, really, I do. I understand all that,' he said. 'I know I should never have any sort of chance with her.'

'Then hadn't you better cure yourself of your infatuation as soon as possible?' Cecilia replied. 'Why go and see her again on Saturday, for instance?'

Her tone was not unkind, although it could hardly be called sympathetic, but she was, Stephen knew, keeping something in reserve. He guessed that she was willing to discuss the subject with him for just so long as he could treat it quietly and remotely; but that she shrank from hearing any emotional protest of his love for any woman other than herself.

'I think I'm safe,' he hazarded, after a short pause.

'You've only seen her twice, so far,' Cecilia began, as if she were going to show further cause for his immediate relinquishment of the pursuit, but he interrupted her without a thought for the further complications in which he was involving himself.

'Oh! much oftener than that,' he said.

'When?' she asked sharply.

'Why, at the King's School,' he said.

'You don't mean to tell me that you were in love with her then,' she commented. 'I should have known!' And then, evidently recalling all the old life at Medboro', speculating and guessing as she talked, she went on, 'Unless it was after I went. But didn't they, Mrs Weatherley and the children, go away, too, that term? You couldn't have . . . Stephen, when was it? Just a day or two before I went away? What happened? Did you speak to her?'

He chose to concentrate on the last question. 'No, I never spoke to her till I met her here last Sunday,' he said.

'But you had made eyes at each other? Was that it? In the Park Road or somewhere?' Cecilia's tone betrayed excitement. She seemed to be on the verge of some important discovery.

Stephen had forgotten his shrewd inference with regard to his mother's distaste for hearing of his love for another woman. He was revelling in the joys of confession. All this talk seemed to bring Margaret so near to him. He could almost persuade himself, at the moment, that he and she had been in some wonderful manner pledged by their youthful recognitions of each other.

'She smiled once, that was all,' he said foolishly, 'in the dining-room at the school. We were practically alone there. And she remembered it here, the other day. She mentioned it.'

'But *when* was that, Stephen?' Cecilia asked eagerly. 'Do you remember the exact day?'

For his present purpose he remembered it all too exactly.

'It was the day before you—went away,' he said.

For two or three minutes, he continued slowly to

pace the carpet, rapt in his own thoughts. The memory of that one insignificant incident in the King's School dining-room was becoming to him a kind of holdfast and solace. He magnified its importance. In retrospect it glowed with a peculiar and wonderful light. He believed that it marked the one high and illuminating moment of life in which he had caught a passing sight of the essential reality.

He was haled out of these intoxicating reflections by the growing consciousness that his mother's silence had been unduly prolonged.

She was sitting very upright and still, staring straight out before her with an expression of intense concentration. As yet there was no suggestion of judgment in her face, but rather of recollection, of analysis, and of an impending and distressing realisation.

As Stephen stopped and looked at her, she drew in her breath with a deep and sustained inspiration, as if she sought by that means to renew and uphold her strength.

'Is anything the matter, mother?' Stephen asked. 'You don't feel faint, do you?'

She turned her head then and stared at him with the cool, detached glance of a judge listening to the defence of some unimportant prisoner.

'Was it really the day before I went away?' she said, as if no interval had elapsed since he had marked that critical date. 'The day that I had my organ lesson in the cathedral—and the Bells came in after supper—and I came up to your room and told you everything about Christopher and me? What a lot of things happened on that day, Stephen. Do you believe in Fate?'

The awful detachment of her tone made him shiver, it had the aloofness of the insane. He tried instinctively to combat it by the familiar humanity of a slight pettishness.

'I don't see why you should take it like this,' he said irritably. 'I didn't, when you told me that you were in love.'

She gave no sign of being annoyed by that daring thrust.

'On the other hand, you certainly gave me neither sympathy nor encouragement,' she remarked, with a cool, ironical smile.

'Well, how could I—under the circumstances?' he returned, still maintaining his defensive note of irritation.

'Oh! the circumstances!' Cecilia ejaculated disdainfully, as if no circumstances could be of any account in this case.

Stephen stood staring at her, trying to read some subtle meaning in her last sentence.

'Wasn't it just you and me?' she explained, with the first ring of emotion coming into her voice. 'And wouldn't you have at least tried to understand, if your silly boy's head hadn't been full of some ridiculous nonsense about a child of how old?—twelve, was she, then, or thirteen?'

'*That* hadn't anything to do with it,' he said, with an effort of scorn, as though he must dismiss her absurd suggestion at once, beat it down and crush it out, before it had time to display itself.

'It had everything to do with it,' Cecilia said, with an effect of definitely taking the stage. 'I didn't know at the time, I couldn't understand it then, but I see it now—oh! so clearly. You didn't want me; quite suddenly you didn't want me any more. And I knew it, though I never guessed why. I thought you were jealous, at first, but afterwards I felt that it was more than that. I felt that it was final, that I had lost you.'

'I was so puzzled by that,' she continued in a cooler

tone; 'I wondered if it were possible that I had always been mistaken in you—if you were, after all, just a conventional little narrow-minded Kirkwood like your father and sisters, and had been so shocked that it had all come out. I tried to believe that. Do you remember how you came in after the cricket match? I was convinced then. I was sure that if you were like us, you couldn't possibly be so wrapt up in your games that you hadn't a thought to spare for me just then of all times. And I tried to console myself with that idea. I kept saying to myself, Oh! Stephen's just a Kirkwood, a little, shop-keeping, Medboro' Kirkwood. He isn't worth bothering about.

'But it wasn't that. I can see it now. You were in love, in your boy's way, with that chit at the school. And you didn't want me, not then. You'd have been afraid to tell me about it, wouldn't you? You'd have expected me to laugh at you. So you weren't so very sorry, after all, that I was going to leave you for good.'

'That isn't true,' Stephen put in with conviction. 'I'd have done anything in the world to stop you going, you know I would. Didn't I try my hardest, and you only laughed at me.'

'Not your hardest, at least not until it was too late,' she said. 'Why didn't you try before? On the field that afternoon? Instead of sulking and mooning and then going in and making a hundred? And afterwards when you came home, did you try then? You didn't, you know you didn't. You were glad to be free of me.'

Stephen frowned and clenched his hands. He could not find the defence that he felt sure must be forthcoming. The accusation that he wanted to be free from her had a spice of truth that he could not deny. He remembered clearly his feeling of release, yet he was sure that there must be some explanation of that.

'Weren't you, now?' she pressed him.

'It's so difficult,' he said evasively. 'It was all so complicated. I don't know what I wanted. I didn't then—except that I am quite certain that I didn't want you to go away with Dr Threlfall.'

'If you'd wanted to keep me, you could have stopped me,' she returned. 'I knew it then. And I should have been glad if you had stopped me. I *wanted* something to hold on to. I meant, I always meant to hold on to you; and then you failed me.' She pulled herself up, controlling the faint tendency to hysteria in her voice as she went on, 'Queer, isn't it, Stephen, to think that if that schoolgirl hadn't happened to smile at you that day, I might still have been living at Medboro?'

He caught at that suggestion as a means of escape from the responsibility she was steadily thrusting upon him. 'But, mother,' he said, 'you're glad now, anyway, that you're not living there still. As things have turned out, it has been all for the best in a way, hasn't it?'

She paused for a moment, watching him attentively. 'Well, yes, of course,' she said lightly. 'I'm certainly better off as I am.'

It was not a convincing answer and Stephen realised the suggestion of some vital reserve which she might or might not be willing to reveal if he pressed her. But he did not wish to penetrate those secrets—or certainly not just then. He wanted to renew the relations she had established so happily, ten days before. They might be superficial, even a trifle theatrical, but they satisfied him. He desired eagerly to be on good terms with her, filial terms; but he knew that they could never recover the old intimacy, that she could never again be his sole object of love and adoration.

He made a gesture that he had caught from her. 'Well, then, why are you so hard on me?' he asked.

'If it has all been for the best?' He smiled, he did all he could to achieve the effect of displaying his love for her under an assumption of serious gaiety.

She shrugged her shoulders and then played up to him by saying, 'I suppose you had my future welfare in mind all the time?'

'I'm afraid I hadn't,' he said. 'If anything I could have done would have kept you from going away, I'd have done it without a second thought.'

'And now?' she asked.

'Now?' he repeated.

'What would you do to keep me now?'

'Anything. Any mortal thing,' he said, and for fear she might instantly name the one obvious thing he would not do, he went on quickly, 'Even walk all the way home to Camberwell, because it's too late to get a bus or a tram, after a long day's work. Can you ask more than that?'

She could have asked much more, but she spared him then. 'I'll give you five shillings for a cab,' she said.

For the time being, the new relations between them were re-established as a working arrangement that might last until the next crisis. But Stephen knew that that crisis might arise at any moment; that he might have to choose between Margaret and his mother—at his mother's dictation.

She only made one further reference to that topic before he went. They were at the hall door then, and she said, 'When—will you move your things up to Bloomsbury Street on Saturday, if you're going to the Weatherley's?'

'Oh! I'll do that first,' he replied.

'Shall you come in here afterwards—to supper?' she asked.

He said that he would.

4

Stephen was irritably aware of not being at all a success for the first half of his call on the Weatherleys. Dr Weatherley seemed to him more adult than ever, and more unimpeachably a scholar and a schoolmaster.

While they were having tea, he stood on the hearth-rug like a pocket Colossus, admirably managing his tea-cup, and talking persistently in a steady stream of assertions that showed how clearly he had made up his mind on every conceivable subject, and how definitely he was able to express himself. He diversified his lecture, however, and at the same time acknowledged his duties as host, by a system of question and answer. Every one present got his or her neat examination in turn, and after the *viva voce* Dr Weatherley would close that aspect of his case with a neat summary either by way of a concise exposition or a polite disagreement, and turn to the next candidate. It was evidently understood by all his visitors that he was a very great man, condescending to an ignorant, if momentarily interesting, group of intelligent listeners.

His sister, Mrs Galloway, who ran the house for him, appeared to accept the inevitability of her brother's manner of conducting the entertainment without approving it. She was a rather untidy widow of fifty or so, with an air of absent-mindedly wishing that the affair was over so that she might attend to something really important elsewhere.

The only visitor whom Stephen particularly noticed among the six or seven who were apparently sitting for their pass degree, was young Hall. (Stephen had still failed to place the distinctive association suggested by the name, Fletton Hall.) He was precisely the same bright, trickily clever boy he had shown himself to be

in old Sercombe's class. Stephen thought him overdressed. His elegant tail-coat, the white slip under his waistcoat, the amazing straightness of his gray trousers, the brilliant boots, emphasised by white spats that fitted so perfectly they might almost have been painted on, all produced an effect that could only be described as 'slick.' Even his neatly handsome face and fair hair seemed to have been considered in relation to his general appearance. He was altogether too complete and consistent for a young man of twenty-four.

He passed his examination with credit. His subject was the influence of journalism on the moulding of public opinion, and as he made it clear that he fully endorsed his host's public pronouncements on the question of Tariff Reform, he received an encouraging pat on the back in the course of Dr Weatherley's summary.

Stephen, on the other hand, did not shine at all. Weatherley, who made it his business to know everything, had deftly turned his address to the subject of trades-unionism by the time he reached Stephen, and having asked him, by way of introduction, what was the effect of that movement on the building trade, forced from him the rather grudging admission that it increased the cost of labour without improving its quality.

'You admit, in fact,' Weatherley said, moving towards his summary, 'that the growth of the trades-unions is becoming a menace to society.'

'The men must defend themselves against sweating,' mumbled Stephen, who was very familiar with the labour point of view on this subject.

'That can be better done by legislation,' Dr Weatherley replied, and showed precisely why and how.

'Only it isn't done,' Stephen persisted, 'and half the abuses of employment would never have been heard

of, if the men hadn't got together and resisted them.'

Weatherley denied that assertion with selected instances, summarised the general argument, and passed on to the next candidate. It was understood that Stephen had been ploughed. He saw young Hall regarding him with a supercilious smile, and had a dreadful inclination to put his tongue out at him. It was not that Stephen cared for young Hall's opinion nor even for Dr Weatherley's, but he would have preferred to have appeared to better advantage before Margaret. She had looked at him once rather sympathetically, when he was under examination, and it had flashed across his mind that she might not always agree with her father's views. How splendid it would have been if he could have been eloquent and convincing, but he knew that he could never be that. He was just a practical, competent builder's clerk, and he must not be tempted to forget the fact. Nevertheless, he longed earnestly for some opportunity to score off that slick, impudent young Hall.

At half-past five Dr Weatherley, having given more than an hour of his valuable time to his inferentially grateful guests, announced, with a decent air of regret, that he had to attend a committee at six o'clock, and there was a general stir and an orthodox murmuring concerning other remembered engagements. Stephen got up with the others, and his hand was shaken in its turn by his departing host. 'You must come and see us again, Kirkwood,' Weatherley said, with a vague smile; 'always delighted to see our old boys.'

Stephen mumbled his acknowledgments, and was looking for Mrs Galloway, when he saw Margaret shaking her head at him with a look that said plainly enough that he was not to go yet; making, at the

same time, a little gesture, as if playfully commanding him to sit down again.

He trembled slightly as he obeyed her, not only because this invitation was an unexpected mark of favour, but also because, as their eyes had met, he had seen something of the same beckoning look she had given him in the school dining-room. In the midst of that little crowd of moving people he and she had been, for one infinitesimal moment, alone, and aware of each other, alone as they had never once been, when they were suspended together in that dangling bucket, two hundred feet in the air. It seemed to him as if in that moment she had lowered her defences, singled him out and approved him.

He was startled when a smooth voice beside him said, 'Well, Kirkwood, how are you getting on?'

'Oh! all right,' Stephen replied automatically. He was absurdly downcast and disappointed to find that young Hall had also been invited to outstay the other guests. Had Margaret given him the same signal, Stephen wondered?

'Mighty clever man, Dr Weatherley,' Hall remarked, by way of continuing the conversation. 'Had you badly over that trades-union argument, didn't he?'

Stephen frowned. 'Is that what you call an argument?' he asked. 'I should have called it a lecture. I never got a chance to put the men's side of the case, and I can tell you they've got plenty to say.'

Hall nodded, and neatly crossed his beautiful legs. 'Socialist?' he asked pertly.

'Not likely,' Stephen returned, with scorn. 'But I shall probably be a big employer of labour one day, and it's just as well to understand what you're up against.' It was not his habit to boast, but young Hall provoked the fighting quality in him. A bitter regret that he had not licked him seven years ago flashed across

Stephen's mind, and was followed by a sudden pleasure in the thought of how conclusively he could do it now if opportunity offered.

Hall's eyebrows went up. 'Didn't know you were one of the bosses,' he remarked, without any sign of being impressed.

'I'm not yet,' Stephen replied curtly. 'What are you doing now?'

Hall looked modestly down at the toe of his shining boot. 'Such is Fame,' he commented thoughtfully.

'Why, what have you been doing?' Stephen asked; 'Robbing a bank or something?'

'I published a book last autumn that had rather a success,' Hall explained. 'You may have seen it advertised, perhaps, and forgotten it. It was called *The Stone Rejected*.'

'Oh! Good Lord!' Stephen ejaculated, placing his lost association at last. 'Of course, Fletton Hall. That's you, is it? Yes, I read that book in Medboro' last January. They shoved it on to me at the library there, told me it was the great success of the year. But I never knew that it had anything to do with you.'

'It did go rather well,' Hall admitted complacently. 'Hardly your kind of book though, I should imagine.'

'Well, no, it wasn't much,' Stephen said brutally, remembering the medley of sentimentalism and religion that had been the book's chief attraction. 'Have you turned pious, then?' he asked. 'From what I remember, you had the religious stop on pretty loud.'

'It pays, you know,' Hall replied lightly; 'when it's not overdone, of course. And luckily for me, I seem to have the knack of it; though honestly, I believe it all as I write. I get tremendously moved by my own writing sometimes.'

Stephen experienced a sensation of almost physical

disgust. He felt that there was something innately false in young Hall. He himself had undoubtedly inherited some of the perception and sensibilities of the artist from his Edwardes ancestry, and he intuitively recognised and loathed the success of the charlatan.

He had no opportunity, however, even if he had had the intention, of expressing his feelings on that subject, for Mrs Galloway had returned while Hall was speaking and now drifted over to the corner in which the two young men were sitting, with an expression of not being quite sure what they were doing there.

Stephen felt a little uncomfortable, but Hall was fully equal to the occasion.

'Hope we're not being a nuisance, Mrs Galloway,' he said brightly. 'Miss Weatherley asked me to stay and talk over that play I want to write for her. I'm hoping to collaborate with Miss Crantock. And Kirkwood and I were just having a chat over old times. We were at school together, you know.'

'No, I didn't,' Mrs Galloway replied vaguely. 'Dr Weatherley has such a large collection of old boys. I don't know why.'

'Would you think it rude of me if I went downstairs to write a few letters?' she continued, looking at Stephen. 'Margaret and Grace will entertain you. Are you writing a play for Margaret too, Mr Kirkwood? I suppose you must be. Everyone is.'

Stephen laughed. 'Then I'm the one exception,' he said.

'Exception to what?' asked Margaret, who had come into the room with her sister as he was speaking.

'To the rule that every one is writing plays for you,' he said. To young Hall and Mrs Galloway he had spoken lightly and easily, but his voice and manner changed as he addressed Margaret. There was now

something almost reproachful in his tone, as if he would chide her for being so beautiful.

'You might try another idea for the Master Builder,' put in Hall, 'with lots of convincing detail, you know. By the way, is that your show on the Embankment? I thought I saw old Dickinson's board up there, the other day.'

'Yes, that's my show,' Stephen replied gravely, and looked at Margaret, at once expecting and dreading that she would re-tell the tale of her recent exploit to young Hall.

It appeared, however, that she also had suddenly developed a reticence upon that topic, for when her aunt began, 'Wasn't that where you went?' Margaret interrupted her at once by saying, 'Now, dear, you may get off to the writing of your beloved letters. You know you're dying to get away.'

Mrs Galloway sighed, and turned to Stephen. 'My nieces pride themselves on being very modern,' she said. 'I'm sure I don't know what we can do about it. Good-bye, Mr Kirkwood. I do really hope you'll come and see us again soon. It's so original of you not to write plays.'

She drifted out of the room without taking any further notice of the brilliant young author of *The Stone Rejected*.

He, however, gave no sign of being offended by her oversight. 'Now, Miss Weatherley,' he said to Margaret, 'are you going to be good enough to give me half an hour? There are heaps of things I want to ask your advice about, and I want your help too, about Miss Crantock. *You* must persuade her, you know; *I* can't. Sometimes she almost gives me the impression, incredible as it seems, that she's a little jealous of my success. Her own books, you know, don't sell. Too clever for the G.P. I tell her it's always a mistake to be too

clever. Never do it myself.' He simpered with an affectation of implying that cleverness of Miss Cranstock's sort was not in his line.

Margaret hesitated and glanced almost timidly at Stephen, who, on his part, was ready just then to pick up young Hall by the slack—if he could find any—of his lovely trousers and toss him out of the window. He knew quite certainly that he could not endure to see young Hall holding a long private conversation with Margaret. He was willing to risk even the ultimate penalty of her displeasure to avoid that. Her hesitating glance decided him. He knew instantly that she did not want to talk about that infernally silly play; and if he had her on his side he cared nothing for manners.

He turned upon young Hall with a touch of fierceness. 'I've got something to talk about to Miss Weatherley too,' he said roughly. 'You'll have to wait.'

Hall manifestly blenched. Stephen's attitude was violent and threatening. He had in that one moment transformed the decorous and secure drawing-room of the house in Bryanston Square into a place of primitive and brutal passions. And Fletton Hall was already a creature of use and custom, over-civilised and tender. His spirit wilted at the least threat of violence. His very vices were the pale and feeble growths of solitude, etiolated and tender from confinement.

He snickered nervously. 'Oh! all right, all right, Kirkwood,' he said in a high, thin voice. 'No need to get excited about it, you know, I can wait.'

Grace Weatherley, standing a little apart from the other three, had surveyed this scene with a smile of amusement: 'If you could put up with my company for a little time, Mr Hall,' she suggested, now, 'perhaps my very precious sister might be able to spare you your half-hour later on. Or do you think she's really worth fighting for?'

'Grace !' Margaret protested.

Hall was mumbling expostulations to the effect that Miss Grace Weatherley's company was all that any man could desire.

'But why shouldn't we be frank, my dear?' Grace asked. 'It's so refreshing. I think it would be perfectly delightful to see an honest fight. Couldn't you come up to the scratch, Mr Hall. I'll be your second. Just one round for the privilege of the first call upon Margaret's attention.'

Hall rapidly recovering himself laughed lightly.

'Afraid I'm hardly up to Kirkwood's weight, you know,' he said. 'He can give me two or three stone, at least. Besides which, I shall be delighted to wait. I don't think you can have heard all the charming things I've been trying to say about you, Miss Weatherley.'

'Oh ! come along, Mr Kirkwood,' Margaret interposed, 'Grace is perfectly dreadful when she gets in this mood. She has got some crazy theory or other about self-expression.'

She was moving away as she spoke, and Stephen followed her across the drawing-room, which was certainly large enough to accommodate two couples without interference.

The whole incident had not lasted more than three or four minutes, but the effect of it had definitely influenced the relations of Stephen and Margaret. Her sister had exhibited him in the guise of Margaret's lover, and she, herself, so far from repudiating that suggestion, had given him preference over his rival, and was leading him into the seclusion of a private conference. At the moment he had been abashed by Grace's innuendo, but now he found himself suddenly valiant and confident.

'I don't want you to talk about that silly play with

Hall,' he said boldly, as soon as they were seated together on the far side of the room.

'Why not?' she asked, without looking at him. Even now that he had so manifestly come to the verge of love-making, she found him different from the other men with whom she had traversed this familiar ground.

'I want to wring his neck,' Stephen affirmed savagely.

'I'm sure you could,' Margaret said: 'but I don't know why you should want to.'

'Do *you* like him?' Stephen asked suspiciously.

'Not particularly,' she said.

'But you—you tolerate him; and you'd let him write a play for you?'

She looked at him mischievously. 'Why not?' she asked.

Stephen frowned. 'I don't like him,' he said.

'I inferred that,' she replied, smiling. 'But it's hardly a reason why I should refuse to let him write a play for me, is it?'

'Have you read his book?' Stephen asked abruptly.

'Of course. That's what the play is about,' she said.

'But you don't mean to say that you could . . . that you'd care to act in a thing like that?' he protested.

'To be quite honest, I don't think I would,' Margaret replied more seriously. His earnestness made her nervous. She was afraid to respond to it, lest what she intended to be nothing more than an amusing flirtation should develop into a disturbing and difficult love-affair. But she found that she could not maintain her persiflage against the steady opposition of his sincerity. Moreover, he had so much the air, just now, of wanting to protect her.

Stephen's gravity was mingled with an evident strain of perplexity as he replied, 'But if you don't

want him to write the play for you, why do you encourage him to think you would?’

‘Oh! one does,’ Margaret said.

‘I wish you wouldn’t,’ Stephen ventured.

‘So insincere?’ she questioned, prepared to find entertainment in the lecture she now confidently anticipated.

He was surprised by her answer. He would never have dreamt of questioning her sincerity, nor, indeed, of criticising her by any common standard. If she *were* insincere, then insincerity was an exquisite and charming virtue in her. There was at the moment but one thing he could not forgive her, and that was the granting of a private interview to the despicable Fletton Hall.

‘Oh! no, I didn’t mean that,’ he said.

‘What *did* you mean, then?’ she asked.

‘Only that I didn’t want you to talk to young Hall,’ he said.

‘Very well, I won’t,’ she agreed experimentally; feeling that it was high time they attempted a new variation. And then, a little scared by the compromising sound of her promise, she continued at once, ‘All the same, I should like to know what you’ve got against him, particularly. We, none of us, care for him, of course. Father thinks he’s clever in his way, but that’s all. And Aunt Judith can’t bear him. She calls him the white rat.’

‘He was called “rat,” at school,’ Stephen interpolated.

‘Was he?’ Margaret commented with interest. She was relieved to find herself on safe ground after her too significant concession to Stephen’s wishes. ‘And did you dislike him very much then?’

‘I suppose you’ve forgotten that he was in the dining-room that day, when you . . . that day at the King’s School, we were talking about last Sunday?’ he said.

He had been so solemn from the outset of their conversation that she failed to remark the additional reverence with which he avoided a too particular description of the unique occasion.

'When I smiled at you, do you mean?' she said. 'No, I seem to remember that there *was* some one else in the room; I didn't know it was Mr Hall. Why?'

'Oh! he—he used to rot me about it afterwards,' Stephen said. 'I wanted to fight him badly; but he sneaked out of it. I wish I had made him, now.'

She glanced at him with a touch of bewilderment. He had made no attempt to flirt with her; he did not even look at her while he was speaking. Yet had his words been delivered with a less serious air, they could only have been interpreted as conveying the intention of love-making. It flashed through her mind that he might be making fun of her, but she dismissed that solution as being too incredible.

'I should have been frightfully proud if I'd known that the boys were fighting about me,' she remarked.

'I don't know that they ever did, actually,' Stephen said, 'but, of course——'

'Of course what?' she prompted him.

'They—well—they admired you tremendously,' he said.

She laughed gaily. 'I wish I'd known,' she commented.

'I don't see that it could have meant anything to you,' Stephen said. 'I should have thought, even then, you must have been pretty well used to it.'

He had no sense of boldness in making that statement, no thought of paying her a compliment. He had simply, as he supposed, affirmed the obvious.

Margaret blushed. 'Oh! what rubbish!' she said.

Stephen accepted her disclaimer in all seriousness.

'You must have known, surely,' he said, 'by the way some of the boys used to look at you.'

'I'm sure *you* never did,' she replied.

'I was too shy,' Stephen explained. 'I felt that I wasn't good enough, any way—if you know what I mean? Even when you . . . smiled at me, I was afraid to smile back. I thought you might have meant it for young Hall, or something.'

'And did you go on thinking that afterwards?' she asked.

'No, not afterwards.'

'What did you think, then? That I was a forward little minx?'

'Afterwards I dared to hope that for some reason or other you had meant it for me,' Stephen said, still with the same detached sedateness. 'I kept on thinking about it. And I suppose it's true in a way that it altered the whole of my life.'

Margaret made an ejaculation of incredulous surprise.

'Do you mind my telling you all this?' Stephen asked.

'You don't think it impertinent of me?'

'No, no, please tell me,' Margaret said. She was beginning to realise his attitude now. She saw it as a strange and thrilling revival of the days of chivalry. He was proclaiming himself her knight, but he asked for no return save the privilege of offering humble service.

'It's rather hard to explain,' Stephen continued; 'but our affairs at home were in a very funny state just then. It was the day before my mother went away, and she told me two nights ago that it was the way I behaved that settled it. She said I was—different to her.'

'Do you mean that she knew about—me?' Margaret asked.

'Not at the time,' Stephen said. 'She only guessed

last Thursday, when I got your note. It was then she told me what a difference it had made my being——' He could not finish that, and went on, 'You see, she saw I had altered in some way, although she didn't know why. She said she felt as if I didn't want *her* any more. We were such tremendous friends in those days——' He left his explanation hanging in the air, but he had said enough.

'But you can't mean to say that you were really in love with a little girl of fourteen,' Margaret said, 'whom you'd never spoken to and hardly ever looked at.'

'I suppose that I'd always known you were there,' Stephen replied, and by that one unconsidered sentence stated his whole case.

To Margaret, that statement came as a revelation, a revelation for which she was not prepared. She had been living a gay, exciting, unnatural life for the past three years. She had been flattered and spoiled. But within her the longing for an ideal had moved deeply and powerfully, and she had had no image for it. Her innumerable triflings with love had invariably ended in boredom; and in the course of the last twelve months she had been strongly influenced by the opinions of her younger sister, who had been preaching the current doctrine of sex antagonism and denouncing the exploitation of women by men.

But now, in a sudden flash of inspiration, Margaret saw the resolution of her own personal dissatisfactions. She knew that for her also some one 'had always been there.' She recognised him by the fact that he, too, knew, and the thought of that thrilled her with the ecstatic emotions of discovery. She suddenly saw Stephen's adoration for her as an expression of the Great Romance, of the longing and dreaming that can only be completed by finding the longed-for companion

in the perfect flesh, and learning that they have dreamt the same dreams in their own solitudes.

Her reply was not less spontaneous than Stephen's statement.

'Do you know Kipling's story, *The Brushwood Boy*?' she asked.

He shook his head, and for the moment the liaison of their spirits was broken. She was disappointed. He ought to have known that reference, she thought, and failed to realise that his ignorance of the literary precedent enhanced the value of the romance, since he had created the story anew by his own genius.

Stephen, on his side, misread her question as an attempt to divert their conversation from the intimate confessions into which he had been led.

'Oh! you ought to read that,' she said carelessly. 'But I suppose you don't have much time for reading.'

'I haven't lately,' he admitted; and by an abrupt transition which neither of them could understand, they found that all the life had gone out of their intercourse, and that they were, apparently, committed to the banalities of polite conversation.

It was almost a relief to them when the patient Fletton Hall at last came across to them to claim the interview.

'Awfully sorry, Miss Weatherley,' he said; 'but I'm afraid I must go in another few minutes. I've got an engagement for dinner that I absolutely daren't break; even for——' His smile and gesture more than completed his sentence, making the compliment a trifle fulsome.

'Some other day, perhaps,' Margaret suggested coldly.

Hall was obviously taken aback. 'But I say, Miss Weatherley, you promised,' he protested. 'And, honestly, it is rather important, isn't it?'

'Is it?' Margaret said absently.

'Well, tremendously important to me, at any rate,' he pleaded, in a voice that seemed to hold the promise of tears.

Margaret looked at him with an immense detachment, as if she were unable at the moment to concentrate her attention on his pleadings.

'I can't see that it has anything to do with me,' she said.

'But the play is to be written for you,' he remonstrated.

Margaret shook her head. 'Don't write it for me,' she said. 'I've practically decided to give up all idea of going on the stage. Miss Crantock is quite right. She has told me I shall never be able to act.'

'But I thought it was all arranged,' protested Hall, with a gasp of dismay, and he looked at Stephen with a sudden malignity, as if he had little doubt who was responsible for this perfidy.

'Well, now it's disarranged, Mr Hall,' Margaret replied, with a touch of petulance. 'I'm sorry if it has put you out in any way, but it's absurd to pretend that the success of the play depends upon me. You must write it for some one else, that's all—some one who can act.'

Hall made it as clear as he could that he was deeply offended. 'Oh, of course, if you've made up your mind, Miss Weatherley, that settles it,' he said. 'I can only apologise for having bothered you. I'm afraid I must really be getting now. Good-bye.'

He bowed neatly to Margaret, stared for a moment vindictively at Stephen, and walked stiffly out of the room with his head up.

Grace Weatherley had already gone, and Margaret and Stephen were left alone.

'You're quite right. He's a silly little man,' she

said. 'I'm sorry if I was rude to him, but I know such hundreds of silly little men, and one has to be—definite.'

'Oh! yes,' Stephen agreed, without interest. Young Hall had ceased to exist for him.

'I ought to be going too, I suppose?' he went on, after a perceptible pause.

'Must you?' was Margaret's conventional response. On the whole, she wanted to keep him a little longer; she had already realised that the fact of his not having read the Kipling story was, if anything, a point in his favour; but she was afraid to give him too much encouragement. Now that she was alone with him in that big empty room, she had a feeling of being exposed and insecure.

'Yes, I'd better,' Stephen said, and stood up; and even as he spoke, Margaret knew that her fear had been foolish, the outcome of her too limited experience. With this man, she would be safe in any conceivable circumstances.

'There's no reason why you should go, as far as I'm concerned,' she said, getting up too. 'I expect my aunt will be back directly.'

Stephen did not answer at once, and they automatically moved away from the seclusion of their corner into the open spaces of the room.

'I've nothing particular to do,' he said suddenly, when they were half-way to the door.

'Well, wait a few minutes, then,' Margaret replied. She stopped in her walk as she spoke and leaned against the back of a settee.

'It's only that I want to ask you one question,' Stephen said, standing before her. 'Were you offended, just now, when you asked me if I'd read that story of Kipling's? Was it just to change the conversation? I didn't mean——'

Margaret blushed furiously. 'No; you didn't understand,' she interrupted him. 'And I can't tell you now. You'd better get the book and read it. Then you will know what I meant. But I think perhaps it might be as well if you did go, now. Will you?'

She gave him her hand with the full intention of returning the pressure she expected; but he took it with a reverence that made her a trifle ashamed of her anticipation. She ought to have known, she thought, that he would never attempt to flirt with her.

5

When he left Bryanston Square, Stephen made straight for the nearest bookshop in Oxford Street. He remembered seeing several volumes of Kipling in his mother's shelves, but he could not wait until he reached Bloomsbury. Moreover, it was quite possible that this particular story might not be included in Cecilia's collection, and in that case he would have to wait until Monday before he received Margaret's message. The thought of that threatened delay so terrified him that he broke into a run. He reached the bookshop, just as the assistant was about to lock the door—the shutters were already down.

'Oh! I'm sorry,' Stephen said breathlessly. 'Just a minute. There's a book I very particularly want, if you don't mind.'

The assistant had caught sight of Stephen running down Oxford Street, and had paused in his work of closing the shop to watch him. It seemed to him now something of an adventure that the man he had watched should have been coming to his own shop. 'What book was it?' he asked, and even as he spoke his mind was tentatively exploring his stock, trying vainly

to guess what sort of book it could be that should tempt a man to run so fast.

'A story of Kipling's called *The Brushwood Boy*,' Stephen said eagerly. 'Have you got it?'

'I'm not sure,' the assistant replied, backing into the darkened shop and switching on the light. 'D'you know which collection it's in?' Probably to settle some bet, was the conclusion to which he had conventionally and disappointingly arrived.

'No notion,' Stephen said.

'Here's the Macmillan pocket edition,' the assistant went on, pointing to a shelf in a big show-case. 'If the story is in one of the usual collections, it ought to be there.'

Stephen instantly began his search, not methodically, but with an eagerness that seriously threatened the clinging leaves of an India paper edition.

'It couldn't be in that, you know,' the assistant advised him, as he began to flutter the pages of *Kim*. 'That's a 'ole book. What we've got to look in is the collections of short stories. What did you say the name was?'

Stephen supplied the name.

'You don't know what it's about?' the assistant asked. He had begun to believe himself mistaken about the bet.

'No idea at all,' Stephen muttered, running down the list of contents of *Life's Handicap*.

'Here it is!' the assistant answered triumphantly. 'Last story in *The Day's Work*. Shall I wrap it up for you?'

Stephen's face cleared. 'No, no, rather not. Thanks, very much,' he said, paid the three shillings and sixpence demanded on the paper wrapper, and fled, leaving the assistant to take down another copy of *The Day's Work* to read at home that evening. He was under

thirty, and still full of human curiosity. The theory he formulated a few hours later was near enough to the truth. 'Some girl, I suppose,' he commented, and afterwards dreamt his own dreams.

Stephen, neglecting the dinner he had ordered in a neighbouring restaurant, was almost confounded by the wonder of his dream, now so astoundingly taking the substance of reality. He realised the application of the story as soon as he reached the account of Georgie's visit to the 'Pepper's Ghost' entertainment in Oxford and the consummation made him catch his breath, and hastily bend his head to hide the evidences of his emotion.

There were immense differences between that romance of *The Brushwood Boy* and his own case. He could not claim the supernatural guidances of a shared dream. But neither could he mistake the clear and exquisite message that had been conveyed to him. 'I had always known you were there,' he had said to her, and she had replied by asking him if he had ever read this story. She could have meant but one thing surely; that she, too, had known he was there and had waited for him.

The glory of that unquestionable inference was, at first, something too bright for him. He dared not let his thought rest on her, almost terrifying as she now was with new possibilities. While she had been removed from him both by her beauty and position, he had been protected by the knowledge of his own inferiority. He could not then be guilty of presumption. The meanest postulant has a right to worship; and he had not aspired to make even the smallest petition for favour. But her message—he could only regard it as a message—had lifted him from his knees and set him beside her. And the transition had been too sudden. He trembled with nervousness at the thought of their next meeting. What could he say to her, how could he

look at her? He was so depressingly aware of his own coarseness and inferiority. He laid his strong workman's hands on the table and shuddered at the sight of them. He was ashamed of himself. He had wild thoughts of running away . . .

When he had paid for the dinner he had not eaten, he set out for a long walk. He would think more calmly while he was walking. He turned his face to the west, and went down the Bayswater Road, through Notting Hill and Chiswick to Kew. Sometimes he walked very slowly, approaching the mystery of Margaret's personality in thought; and then he would flush hotly at his own daring and stride along so furiously that people would turn to look curiously after him.

He was completely unaware of his surroundings. It was as if the ordinary processes of his being had interchanged their functions. His conscious mind, absorbed by a single idea, had withdrawn from the duties of everyday life, and his safe guidance through the traffic and hazards of London was relegated to the power that will steer a somnambulist unerringly along the edge of an abyss.

But gradually his thought, and with it his whole being, began to right itself. Some misconceived, slightly aborted tangle of his life was clearing and dissolving with every approach to his realisation of Margaret. Although he himself was serenely unaware of the fact, he was separating his conception of her from that of his mother; and with that separation, the strange dread that had interposed between him and his human desire for Margaret was slowly dispersing. His head lifted and a new confidence came into his walk. The sense of his own unworthiness began rapidly to fade. He realised himself as supremely favoured among men.

He came back to a vivid knowledge of his surroundings, on the middle of Kew Bridge, staring westward at the sinking fires of the June sunset. In the middle distance the stain of rose reflected from the sky merged into the black greens of the darkening river. And to Stephen, the scene had an effect of resolving some prodigious conflict. The smooth flow of the slackening flood, softly sucking and gurgling about the piers, took up the same suggestion of consummation. He felt himself moving with the tide, not towards rest and peace, but towards some tense and trembling climax of achievement.

His heart cried aloud that he was Margaret's lover and a free man, free to plead and to woo.

But at that thought, an intolerable desire for her presence surged over him. He wanted furiously to explain to her the intricate and detaining mysteries through which he had passed to reach her. She alone would be able to understand how he had grovelled at her feet, and why he was, now, ready to stand beside her. Had she not admitted her knowledge of the fact that they two were predestined affinities, lovers from another time, magically renewed to continue their eternal romance in this exquisite world of form and colour.

5

The realisation that Margaret would be at the Auditorium decided Stephen that he need not wait until the next day before he saw her again. If he had had to storm the house in Bryanston Square, he might have hesitated. Although he was moving on a higher plane of existence that evening, his judgment upon the little affairs of common humanity, was quickened rather

than impaired by his translation. He looked down upon the earth with an exquisitely sensitive understanding of all mankind. He was God, and he loved all men and women, knowing their weakness. He knew, for instance, that Dr Weatherley and his sister, temporarily blinded by the pettiness of the flesh, would resent and resist an attempt to pick Margaret out of her proper surroundings at ten o'clock, in order to tell her that he and she were predestined affinities. But he could see her after the theatre without opposition. He could meet her at the stage door and they would drive round Grosvenor Square while he told her everything that he had in his heart to tell her.

He corrected one egregious mistake in that plan, however, as he ecstatically pondered the detail of it on the tram that took him back to Hammersmith. They must not drive round Grosvenor Square, that was the scene of his reconciliation with his mother, and had associations that he instinctively wished to avoid. No, they would go straight back to Bryanston Square and drive round that, in sight of her own house, under her father's eye, as it were. By doing that, he would conciliate the petty prejudices of the earthbound, who could not be expected to understand.

He reached the theatre soon after ten, and an inquiry of the stage-door keeper, who seemed quite used to the question put to him and evidently expected a tip, elicited the information that Miss 'Winifred Travers'—as Margaret was known at the Auditorium—would not leave the house until a quarter past eleven.

The delay did not greatly vex Stephen. He looked forward to the meeting too serenely to be annoyed by its postponement for another hour. His spirit moved in places of deep and tranquil expectation. Greater joy was presently to come to him, but the anticipation was very sweet.

He wandered aimlessly about the comparatively quiet streets, renewing his happiness by the contemplation of all that Margaret had implied by her message. And once or twice he paused near an arc lamp and re-read a passage here and there from *The Brushwood Boy*.

When he returned to the theatre the audience was already thronging the pavement about the portico; and he turned with a sudden haste into the side street. The fear that he might miss her after all came with a shock of surprise. His dreams had been so confident.

There was a little group of men and women round the stage-door, a chattering of high-pitched, feminine voices, and a clinging aroma of scent. But Margaret was not a member of that group, and as Stephen skirted it, it began rapidly to disperse with laughter and the exchange of shrill repartee. And then as Stephen with a falling heart made for the door, Margaret came out talking to an imposing-looking aristocrat in a crush-hat and evening dress.

Stephen had not considered this most probable contingency, but he did not hesitate. Ignoring her companion, he went straight up to Margaret. 'I had to see you again, to-night,' he said. 'I couldn't wait. I've read *The Brushwood Boy*, and I—I understand everything.'

Margaret took a step backward as if he had threatened her.

'Here, what's this?' her companion exclaimed, making a movement as if to interfere between them.

The haze of romance through which Stephen had been observing the transfigured pageant of the world, was rapidly thinning; and through the dissolving vapours, he saw Margaret's face, perplexed and doubtful, when it should have glowed with the fervour of the response he had so faithfully expected.

'Don't you understand?' he besought her, entirely

disregarding her companion's tentative effort to come between them. 'I've read your—your message'—his hand was groping at his jacket-pocket as if he would produce his evidence—'and . . . and I thought . . .'

His voice trailed away into silence. The last wreath of mist had cleared from before his eyes, and the vividness of Margaret's expression and gesture presented a reality only less cruel than the sound of her laugh.

He turned away with a quick movement that conveyed his sense of horror. Just so might he have fled, if some lovely fantasy taking shape before him had instantly and revoltingly developed into the image of the foul and obscene. He was stricken with a furious passion to escape; and he began to run even as he had run seven years before, from the sound of a laugh which seemed to him now to have been precisely repeated.

But this time he believed that he could never escape by flight; that Death could be his only refuge. While he lived he could never forget, nor indeed cease to hear, the note of contempt that dinned in his ears—and changed to high hysterical mockery, invading and surrounding him, till he felt that he must beat his head savagely against the wall, beat out the power of hearing and feeling, beat out his very life to escape from the torture of that maddening, regardless persecution.

Chapter Seven

I

It was nearly midnight when Stephen came to the door of the Threlfall's house in Bedford Square.

The necessity for seeing his mother at once was quite clear in his mind, although he had no definite idea of what he proposed to say to her. She represented for him just then his single holdfast on life; and so far as he was capable of making any plan, he had decided that if she failed him he would plunge himself forth-into the darkness and rest of the unknown. What means he should adopt to hasten his crossing of the great boundary, he neither knew nor cared. He left that question for later consideration. He knew that he could do it. He had but to recall his emotions of the past hour and the resolution of despair would come to him. Or even the thought of Margaret, despising him and in love with another man, would be sufficient. *His* struggle would be for the desire to live. Death would be welcome and easy of attainment. . . .

Christopher Threlfall opened the door. He was in evening dress, and looked tired and worried.

'Hallo! Is it you?' he exclaimed. 'Cecilia gave you up an hour ago.' He stood in the doorway and apparently had no intention of asking Stephen to come in.

'I want to see her,' Stephen said. He felt that he could not be bothered with Threlfall just now, and gave his sentence the sound of a command.

'Rather late, isn't it?' Threlfall asked. 'I expect she has gone to bed.'

'May I come in? I must see her,' Stephen replied impatiently. 'Can't you see that it's important?'

Threlfall shrugged his shoulders hastily. 'If you must, of course,' he said, as if he nevertheless regretted Stephen's lack of manner.

'Where shall I find her?' Stephen asked, as he came into the hall.

'She was in her own room upstairs,' Threlfall replied, 'but I should say that she's probably in bed now.' He closed the hall door and went into his own study on the ground floor with the air of refusing to be implicated any further in so unconventional and ill-bred an affair.

Stephen went straight up to his mother's boudoir, and walked in without knocking. He was quite sure that he would find her there. What he still doubted was her welcome.

She was standing in the middle of the room facing the door when he entered.

'What is it, Stephen? What has happened?' she asked, before he had time to speak. 'I heard the bell ring, and I knew it was you.'

There was a note of agitation and distress in her voice, but her eyes shone with a light that, in some way, suggested triumph.

'I had to come and see you,' Stephen said.

Cecilia was watching him intently. She guessed that there could be but one reason for his coming at that time and with this mark of tragedy in his face; but she was uncertain, as yet, of the nature of his wound. He was, she knew, one of those who would take their first love seriously, perhaps tragically. And it might be that he had suffered no more than a scratch, had mistaken some indifference or feminine whim of Margaret's for the ultimate disaster.

'Come and tell me all about it, little boy,' she said

gently. 'We shan't be interrupted.' She shut and locked the door herself, and then took his arm and led him across the room. She had an air of petting and protecting him, as if he were an invalid.

'Sit at my feet, Stephen, as you used to do, and tell me all about it,' she said softly, humouring and soothing him. And when she had sat down, and Stephen, silent still but obedient to her will, was sitting on a footstool at her knee, she did not urge him to begin his story, but waited quietly in an attentive silence, gently smoothing and fondling his hair.

'You won't mind my telling you everything?' he began, after a long pause. Already he felt soothed and comforted, but as her influence increased about him the memory of his boyhood aroused old habits of caution. She was going to be nice to him, but even her softest moods sometimes gave way under provocation.

'Tell me everything, dear,' she said. 'Of course, I can guess most of it. But have you actually *said* anything to Margaret? So soon? Wasn't that too—too precipitate?'

'In a way, I have,' he admitted. 'Only not the usual way, quite. You see, we talked this afternoon quite a lot—we were practically alone in the drawing-room; and we got back to the subject of the King's School and her smiling at me. And then I said—I don't remember just how it came in—that I had always known she was there, and she asked me if I had ever read *The Brushwood Boy*. Do you know it, mother?'

'Yes, I know it, dear; go on!' she said.

'Well, I didn't know it,' he continued. 'But directly I left her I went and bought a copy, and then I thought—oh! I felt sure that there couldn't be any doubt about it—wouldn't any one? I felt as if she had sent me a message to say that she—cared, too.'

'And how do you know that she doesn't?' Cecilia asked.

'I went to meet her as she came out of the theatre,' Stephen said. 'And I saw her come out. She was with another man.' He stopped abruptly. He had been calm enough in his telling of the story until then. It had all seemed to him so remote in time from his present life, like the memory of some far-away disaster from which he had mercifully escaped. But now all his pain began to burn him again. He gave a little groan and leaned forward hiding his face in his hands.

'But, Stephen,' Cecilia protested, 'that might not have meant anything.'

'Oh! not in itself; but I know,' he muttered.

'Did you speak to her?'

'Tried to,' he said. 'She didn't answer—at least——'

'What? What did she do?'

He had to make a violent effort to tell her, but once the fatal word had been uttered, his bonds were loosed and all that was scalding and destroying him burst forth. 'She—she laughed,' he said. And then he jumped to his feet and went on, facing his mother: 'Not just an ordinary laugh—a horrible, cruel laugh. It was exactly like your laugh when I begged you not to go away with Dr Threlfall, that night in the Lincoln Road. It nearly drove me mad. I had to run to get away from it. And to-night it was just the same; I couldn't bear it. I—I wanted to bang my head against the walls.'

'Oh! Stephen!' Cecilia's outcry was so emotional that the sound of it arrested the growing violence of his confession.

'What? Why did you call out like that?' he asked.

She was sitting, tense and scared, staring at him with an expression that was at once amazed and terrified.

'You couldn't possibly remember,' she said, and drew a deep, upholding breath. The fear was dying out of her face, but the look of wonder remained. 'Oh! it isn't possible,' she exclaimed. 'It couldn't be that.'

'Couldn't be what?' he asked, with an echo of her recent alarm in his voice. He had instantly leapt to the conclusion that she had guessed at some horrible explanation of Margaret's rejection of him, that she knew some damning fact of which he was ignorant.

'Sit down again, Stephen,' his mother begged him. 'I'll tell you. It can't hurt you now. But I've never told any one before. No one knows but you and me; and you've forgotten.'

He sat down again at her feet and stared up at her with an eager dread. She was quite calm now, but that look of curious wonder still remained on her face.

'What is it, mother?' he asked apprehensively.

'Perhaps it hasn't anything to do with it,' she said. 'But when you talked about my laughing and your wanting to bang your head against the wall, it brought everything back to me so vividly. It seemed just as if it were happening all over again.'

Stephen shivered slightly. 'Again?' he repeated.

'You were only three, darling,' Cecilia explained. 'Just a little bit of a toddling thing, with a funny temper of your own that used to amuse me. I've seen you bite a cupboard door in your little rage because you couldn't get it open. And one day, for some reason, I quite forget what, you got in one of your rages with me, and I began to laugh at you. I began to laugh, just because it was really funny to see such a mite attacking me so viciously; but the more I laughed the more angry you were, and at last I got absolutely hysterical and I simply could not stop. And then quite suddenly you ran away from me, and began to bang your head against the wall. That stopped me at once. It

was dreadful to see you doing it, and I jumped up and caught hold of you. But either you had really banged your head hard enough to hurt yourself, or you had some kind of fit, whatever it was, you were as white as a ghost when I took you up, and for ten minutes or more you were just like a dead thing. I—I thought you were going to die——’

Stephen had closed his eyes, and as she paused he said in a low, still voice, ‘And afterwards you were angry with me for having frightened you.’

‘Stephen! Do you remember it?’ she asked.

‘I do now,’ he said, in the same calm, remote tone, and still keeping his eyes shut. ‘It’s like something that’s happening at the present moment, I can see the pattern on the wall-paper where I banged my head. There was a sort of diamond shape on it, and I thought it was really sharp and would run into me. I’ve dreamt of that diamond-shaped thing, but I never knew what it was before. And I can hear you laugh. It was like a thousand devils persecuting me; it was the most hateful thing in the world. I felt that if I couldn’t get away from it, I must go mad.’

‘Stephen, don’t,’ Cecilia besought him. She laid her hand over his mouth to check his speech; and then she leaned right over him, and pressed her face against his head. ‘Can’t you forgive me?’ she whispered. ‘It was silly of me to laugh at you, but I couldn’t help it at the beginning and afterwards I couldn’t stop.’

He did not shrink from her caress. ‘I can forgive you for that easily enough,’ he said tenderly. ‘It was the second time that really hurt me.’

‘But that——’ she began, and checked herself with a faint gasp of realisation.

For in that moment she understood the choice that lay before her. Even as her mind returned to the scene on that fateful evening in the Lincoln Road,

seeking the true explanation of her refusal of Stephen's advances, she understood not only how her own laugh had been forced from her by her very love from Stephen, but also that Margaret, too, loved him.

She saw the two cases as influenced by identical motives. She had desired that freedom of opportunity, that larger life which her love for Stephen would have forbidden; and she read into Margaret's response the stirring of a precisely similar impulse. For Margaret, the admission of love could only mean a marriage that would confine her within the boundaries of a very limited world; and she had, no doubt, re-acted in face of that threatened limitation just as Cecilia had done before her.

And with that, as she believed, certain knowledge to guide her, Cecilia instantly recognised the alternatives between which she must make her choice. On the one hand she might explain to Stephen the quality and influences of the emotion that had swayed her to repulse him, and by so doing encourage him even to the sure hope of winning Margaret. 'If you had persisted you would have won me,' she heard herself saying, 'and you can win her, too, if you want her.' And in imagination she saw the light of happiness coming into Stephen's face, at the prospect of a joy that would, as she knew, finally separate him from herself.

On the other hand, she might say nothing and keep him now when she so desperately wanted him. The chances were that he would not meet Margaret again. She had crossed her Rubicon with the rejection of him outside the theatre, and would go on to the attainment of her personal ambitions; while he was too convinced of her contempt for him to dare any further pursuit. . . .

'What were you going to say?' Stephen asked, looking up at her with a touch of wistfulness, as if he

were very willing to accept any explanation she might have to offer.

'Oh! my dear,' she said. 'I don't think you must be too hard on me for what happened that night. Think what an awful state of nerves I was in. My laugh was simply hysteria. When you began to plead to me, it just put the last touch to it all. I was crying before you were well out of the room.'

He nodded thoughtfully, seeming to tick off her answer to every indictment he could bring, and approving the defence.

'I can understand it all *now*,' he said. 'It looks quite different. I feel as if what you told me about that first time, at home, explains everything. I'm glad I've remembered that somehow. It's—it's rather like waking from a bad dream, and finding it isn't true.'

He put up his face to be kissed, much as he might have done twenty years earlier.

After that caress they sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Cecilia's imperative need for the response she desired from him led her on to confession.

'We're neither of us very happy people to-night, Stephen,' she began; 'but we've got each other again, haven't we? We can find no end of consolation in that.'

He sighed as if the thought of his own unhappiness had been revived by her speech. 'It all looks just a blank,' he said, 'so far as I'm concerned. I loathe the idea of going back to the works on Monday. I think I shall go abroad, emigrate to Canada or Australia, or some place like that.'

'You'll take me with you, Stephen, won't you?' Cecilia replied, intent on her own trouble.

'But mother,' he expostulated, 'you don't mean that there's anything really wrong between you and—and Dr Threlfall, do you?'

She gave a little contemptuous laugh. 'Oh! my

dear,' she said, 'everything's just as wrong as it can possibly be—has been for three years or more. I'm an old woman, and he's clever and handsome and attractive, and cursed by a temperament. He was a widower when he met me, of course, and his first wife hadn't been his first love; and there were others between her and me. And well,' she shrugged her shoulders, 'I've let him go his own way for the last three years.'

Stephen jumped to his feet. 'Good God, he ought to be horsewhipped,' he said fiercely.

Cecilia smiled and pursed her lips. 'Oh! no,' she said. 'It was my own fault. I might have known what to expect. And he cares for me still, in a way. He doesn't want me to leave him. He's always making promises,' she sighed her long regret for the feeble possibilities of life, as she continued, 'One can't have it both ways, Stephen. Your poor little father adored me utterly, and I despised him for it. Now——' she broke off with a gesture that did not too clearly display the alternative.

'But do you care for *him* still?' Stephen asked, underlining her omission.

'I don't know what I care for or what I want,' she said, with a touch of passion, 'except that I want to *live*. There's this play, for instance, it's practically settled, and I shall make a success of it.' She got up and began to move restlessly about the room as she spoke, turning to Stephen now and again to make her points. 'Well, that's living, at moments. One gets applause and admiration, and it's like drink or drugs at the time. Afterwards one has the usual reaction. It doesn't really satisfy me, and I know it, but I must do *something* before I'm burnt out. I was shut up so long. Just think of all those years at Medboro', Stephen. Is it any wonder that I've wanted to crowd a lifetime into the years since I came away? . . . But

now—oh! I don't know. I can see the futility of it sometimes. There's no satisfaction in it, nothing real for a woman of forty-eight, because one daren't look forward. Suppose I do make a success of the part, it can't last. And, besides, I don't want to be tied to the stage for the rest of my life. I should get bored with it, I know I should, in a year or two—especially as, at the best, I can only hope to be quite a minor star. No, I want a real occupation, Stephen. Something that will absorb me, body and soul. Do you think I could find that in looking after you in the wilds of Canada?'

'I doubt it,' Stephen said solemnly.

'Why?' she asked, coming up to him and putting her hands on his shoulders. 'You mean more to me than any other living being. And I'm as strong as a horse. I *could* work at whatever one does in those places, making bread and looking after the dairy or whatever it is.'

'And never seeing another soul from one month's end to the next?' he suggested.

'Oh! you don't want me, that's what it is,' she replied petulantly, but still holding him. 'You want to go and brood over your misery in solitude, and I shan't let you.'

'I don't,' he said, but he looked as if he were near the edge of tears.

'Does it hurt so much?' she asked.

His only reply was to put his arms round her and hide his face on her shoulder. Her talk of Canada had shown him all too clearly that there was no escape for him by that way. He wanted Margaret. With her he could have welcomed any solitude. But Cecilia was no longer a lover to him. All the tangle of his thought had been straightened out; and he saw her, with something of shame at his own infidelity but something

also of the careless arrogance of youth, as the selfish, rather difficult woman, whose one claim upon him was the fact that she was his mother.

Cecilia drew herself away from him. 'It's no good pitying yourself, Stephen,' she said. 'I told you it was hopeless, and you said you could take care of yourself.'

'I could, if she hadn't let me think that she cared for me,' he returned, turning his shoulder to her, so that she might not see the evidences of what she had termed his self-pity.

She was conscious of having been rebuffed, although neither his words nor his actions had given her any sensible cause for that feeling. 'But you surely aren't going to waste your life because Margaret Weatherley flirted with you,' she said sharply. 'She flirts with every one. I fancy that Christopher has had quite a bad heartache on her account.'

'Oh! you can't understand,' Stephen said, still with his back to her.

Cecilia flinched. He did not care. She no longer had any influence over him. She saw herself and him alone together in the wilds, and her picture of him was of a man brooding over a perpetual sorrow. They would quarrel. She would never be able to endure the sight of his unappeasable longing for another woman.

'I suppose you think I'm horribly selfish?' she said, on the impulse of the moment.

Stephen slowly lifted his head and turned to look at her. 'I didn't mean that, mother,' he said. 'I only meant that you'd never be able to understand how I feel about—about this.'

'Why shouldn't I?' she asked.

'I don't know why,' he said. He had an instinctive desire to spare her. He felt that he was to blame for

having failed her; that he ought to have welcomed her suggestion of their going away together.

She read his thought all too clearly. She realised that her power over him was gone and could never be recovered. Something had happened to him that night while they had been talking together. It was as if a spell had been broken, though how or when it had been broken she had no idea. But with that realisation, a feeling of impotence came to her, an unendurable feeling that she could not endure. Power she must have, and if she could no longer exercise it in the old way, she would find a new mode of expression in her dealings with him. She would give, would make him a magnificent present of his desire; and in giving recover, not his worship—that had been transferred to another ideal—but at least his admiration for her cleverness and something, perhaps, of his fond gratitude. But, with that determination, her instant appreciation of the part she was called upon to play changed her resentment to sympathy. She was suddenly sorry for his distress. Had she not deserted him when he had pleaded with her; been ready to condemn him to a greater misery when it was in her power to bring him what he would regard as supreme happiness? She saw her life influenced by a new and as it seemed then, an exquisitely beautiful motive, the motive of self-renunciation.

‘I can tell you why,’ she said. ‘Because you think that I could never bear to see you in love with another woman. Well, it’s true, or it was true; but no other woman will ever love you as much as I have, Stephen—even if I have been selfish in my love.’ She looked straight into his eyes, watching him anxiously as she continued, ‘And Stephen, I never loved you so much as when you pleaded with me the night I ran away. That laugh of mine that hurt you so much ought to

have told you how I loved you. Can't you see now, that it was a sign of my despair? I couldn't keep you off. That laugh was my last effort to defend myself. If you'd said one more word, I should have given in. I was at the end of my resources. I should have given up Christopher and gone home with you. And I don't know now whether it was a relief or a bitter disappointment to me when you ran away.' She paused, but still he did not understand.

'It's true, Stephen,' she said. 'Can't you realise now that when a woman laughs like that, it is because she is torn in two?'

And then the sight of the dawning realisation in his eyes nearly changed her purpose. Was she to have no part in his happiness, even though she won it for him by an act of self-renunciation?

'Oh! you begin to see new prospects, do you?' she asked mockingly. 'But you might at least thank me for opening your blind eyes.'

'Do you mean that you think it's possible she really does care after all?' he asked.

Cecilia laughed. His obsession was too manifest. Yet while it provoked her, it stiffened her in her determination. She was aware of him as of an unresponsive audience. Only one item in her whole repertoire could quicken him now, and she meant to produce it. After that she must resign herself to the inevitable. In future she would be—just his mother; a useful, elderly relation who was expected to be sympathetic and kind on all occasions. No doubt he would still be polite to her.

'Do I think it's possible?' she said, with a half-supercilious aloofness, her habit impelling her to play with him and keep him in suspense for still a few more moments. 'You have told me so little about your meeting,' she continued. 'How did she look at you? Was she smiling when she laughed at you?'

Stephen shook his head emphatically. 'She looked hard and cruel,' he said.

Cecilia lifted her chin with a little movement of contempt. 'What fools men are, when they're in love,' she commented.

'Mother, you don't really believe——' he began eagerly, but she impatiently waved her hands at him for silence.

'Believe? No. I'm sure,' she said. 'Haven't I been through it all myself? Can't you see that you're a temptation to her, boy? She wants you desperately, but she's a trained and experienced modern young woman, and she has a very clear idea of the value of money and position and of all that she would lose by marrying you. Love in a cottage is very pretty and romantic, but love in a semi-detached villa, you know, Stephen, is not an attractive ideal. And I don't suppose for one minute that old Dr Weatherley will help you. He's just the kind of man to make an endless fuss. He's just as much a schoolmaster as ever he was, and he'll treat you as if you were a very naughty boy and try to expel you.'

'So you see,' she went on in a more gentle voice, 'that Margaret had a very good excuse for wanting to—choke you off, Stephen. I've no doubt that after you left her this afternoon, she told herself seriously that it wouldn't do. And, by the way, do you realise that she probably absented herself from the matinée to-day on purpose to see you? And very likely her reaction took the form of promising to go out to supper with a really eligible young man. Did he look eligible? Yes? It was probably Lord Merton. He proposes to her regularly once a week. Well, picture her feelings, my dear little boy, when she came out of the theatre, full of the best intentions to marry suitably, and saw her temptation waiting for her. Of course she hated

herself, and hated you for having made her love you. What she would have liked to do at that minute would have been to shriek and push you under the wheels of a motor-bus. She wanted to get rid of you at any price. And I've no doubt that as soon as you had run away, she refused to go out with young Lord Merton, and went home and cried.'

'Oh! mother,' sighed Stephen ecstatically. She had made it all look so reasonable and probable that the memory of Margaret's laugh was becoming a beautiful and thrilling thing.

'But what ought I to do?' he asked.

Cecilia smiled rather sardonically. 'I'm the complete instructress, aren't I, Stephen?' she replied. 'You didn't realise how useful I might be in advising you how to make love. Do? Why, besiege her, of course. Take it for granted that you and she are romantically pledged to each other. Keep that stop out all the time and never mind how often you repeat the *motif*. Make her run away with you. Though Heaven knows what you'll do afterwards. What will Mr Dickinson say?'

'Oh! that'll be all right,' Stephen said impatiently. He was full of courage and determination now. If he could but have spoken to Margaret at that moment, he would, indeed, have 'besieged' her with confidence.

'Will it? Oh! very well. I don't suppose I can expect you to be sensible about that,' Cecilia replied. Her voice had suddenly fallen to a note of weariness and distaste. She looked as if she had passed in a moment from the publicity of the stage to the solitude of her own thoughts.

'I think you must go now, Stephen,' she said. 'It's nearly two o'clock, and I feel fagged out.'

Stephen looked disappointed. He would have liked to stay a little longer gleaning new and more glorious encouragement from her.

She saw the longing in his face and anticipated his request. 'You'd better go,' she said. 'If you stay another minute I shall probably spoil everything I've said to you out of sheer ennui. I simply can't bear another word about your infatuation to-night.'

He realised the finality of her threat, and his conscience reproached him for his selfishness. 'Yes, you're tired out,' he said; 'I'll go. And mother, I am most tremendously grateful to you. You know that, don't you?'

'Oh! yes,' she agreed wearily. 'Don't try to make amends by thanking me.'

He hesitated a moment over the word 'amends,' but decided to let it pass. 'I shall see you to-morrow, shan't I?' he asked, and then embraced her with something more than his usual warmth. 'I don't know what I should do without you,' he murmured fondly.

She took his kiss placidly. 'You must tell me how your affair goes,' she said.

But when he had gone she sat quite still in her chair, staring out in front of her as if she sought to find some least hope that would make her future life, the life of renunciation, endurable. And once, long after he had left the house she got up and made a quick movement towards the door, as if, after all, she had changed her mind and would call him back to her.

2

Stephen awoke the next morning in his Bloomsbury Street lodgings with a sense of new beginnings. It seemed to him that from to-day his whole life would start afresh. Something had happened to him, some dark place in his mind had been opened and cleared up,

and he felt himself invigorated and renewed. He attributed the change solely to the fact that his mother had given him a hope of winning Margaret. Cecilia's analysis appeared no less true to him this morning than it had when it had come to him as a revelation the night before. And he found no special significance in the fact that his thought had a tendency to revert with a strange sense of pleasure to that other explanation of hers concerning the origin of his peculiar horror at the sound of hysterical laughter. The thought of that now was like ease after pain. He could reflect upon it and smile at his old weakness in the enjoyment of his present strength.

It was not until he had had breakfast that he began to apprehend the possibility that he had also lost something. He found himself wanting to ask his mother for further advice, and realising that it would be impossible for him to go to her. He was aware, he knew not how or why, that the liaison of sympathy between them was definitely broken. He had accused her of not understanding, and she had replied by proving to him how truly and comprehensively she understood all about him. But in doing it she had, he thought, too fully revealed herself. He saw, now, that she must have deliberately hidden her knowledge in the first instance. She must have known when he told her of the scene outside the theatre that the true interpretation of it could only be read as an encouragement to hope. Yet she had concealed that vitally important knowledge from him then, and had even, with what seemed to be unforgivable chicane, disguised the true cause of her own laughter, seven years earlier.

The purpose of her deceit was quite evident. She had wanted to keep him to herself, to separate him from Margaret. It was not until she had seen how hopeless her purpose was, that she had thrown up her hand and

told him the truth. And in doing that she had, he knew, relinquished her claim upon him. He had the same feelings of loss and relief that he had had when they quarrelled at Medboro'. But this time it was final. Her last words to him had been to the effect that he must tell her how his 'affair' went; the conventional request of a faintly interested spectator. That speech, alone, was enough to warn him that he must take her no more confidences. But had he not always known that he would never be able to confide to her his love for another woman? That was her limitation, and this morning it seemed to him a very drastic one . . .

He was surprised when, at one o'clock, the admirable Butler brought over a letter from Cecilia. At first he thought that contrary to all precedent she had put her grievance against him in writing. But the note was very brief:—

'DEAR STEPHEN,—I got her on the telephone this morning, and she's coming here this afternoon. Don't turn up before six, and then come straight up to my room. If you don't obey these necessary instructions I wash my hands of you.

'Your patient MOTHER.'

When he read that note, and for some considerable time after, Stephen had no thought to spare for the writer of it. He had spent the better part of the morning pretending to read, and wondering whether, when he went to Bryanston Square he would find an opportunity to speak to Margaret alone. He had meant to go, although he could think of no excuse to offer for calling there again so soon. There was, indeed, nothing else to be done. He had for a few reactionary moments considered the idea of writing to Margaret, and then had dismissed that absurd notion with contempt. He

had no more ability to write now than when he had attended old Sercombe's literature class. Perhaps rather less. It had been an obvious deduction, therefore, that he must snap his fingers at convention and go to Bryanston Square. He had meant to go early, say at three o'clock; and ask for Margaret at the door.

And now everything was to be made easy for him, and he could meet Margaret with the certain assurance that she would, at least, listen to him. If she had wanted to avoid him, she would not have accepted an invitation to his mother's house.

Nevertheless, although Stephen's mind during the next five impatient hours continued to be occupied unprogressively with a hundred different versions of his coming conversation with Margaret, he found time for an occasional thought of Cecilia. She was going to be sensible, was his summary of that aspect of the future. She was going to be a reasonable mother, and help him as any reasonable mother should. Already the new life that he had begun so hopefully that morning was beginning to absorb him, and only quite distantly was he aware of some vague tragedy that had threatened her. Probably all her talk of the night before had been exaggerated. She worked herself up into such states of emotion. No doubt she and Threlfall would settle down quite comfortably in time. And she had her play—and little Chris.

3

But if some vital quality in their relations was spent, he had lost none of his admiration for her powers of finesse. He had no idea what her plan might be for that afternoon, but he had no doubt that it was most admirably adapted to the needs of the situation. Once

she had, as he now presumed to be the case, conquered her ridiculous jealousy, she would prove an invaluable ally. It might be that if all went well, she could be coaxed into using her wonderful powers for the conciliation and persuasion of Margaret's father.

He heard no sound of conversation as he passed the drawing-room door, and inferred that the usual crowd of Sunday visitors had already departed. Despite his confidence in Cecilia's inspired diplomacy, he was immensely alert and rather anxious. He had a queer dread of finding Margaret alone in his mother's room. He felt that he wanted time for preparation, a breathing space in which to watch her, and listen to her voice, and excite himself to what would be, he knew, the incalculably difficult task of saying what he had to say.

He was greatly relieved to hear Cecilia's voice speaking as he paused outside the door; but the confidence that filled him as he entered the room was instantly withdrawn again.

His mother and Margaret, who had taken off her hat and looked very much at home, were sitting side by side with an effect of exchanging confidences, on the little Chesterfield between the windows. Cecilia raised her eyebrows as he came in with an expression of surprise.

'You?' she said. 'I'd quite given you up for to-day.'

Stephen's heart fell. He had hoped that the great difficulty had been smoothed away for him by his mother's offices, that she had perhaps told Margaret his story. And now, not only was all his task still before him, but also he was taxed with the distasteful necessity of playing up to Cecilia's dishonesties. He did not even see the quick look of inquiry that Margaret gave him, as muttering something that he intended to be inaudible he crossed the room to greet her.

'Hardly any one came to-day,' Cecilia explained in a bright, clear voice. 'It happens like that sometimes, so Margaret and I escaped up here to talk about the theatre. We are quite agreed that it's a perfectly hateful profession.'

'And I'm giving it up, if I can ever be said to have belonged to it,' Margaret added, with a slightly conciliatory air of having deferred to some wish of Stephen's. 'But I practically told you that yesterday, didn't I?' she concluded.

'Do you mean that you are leaving the Auditorium?' he asked, as he drew up a chair towards his mother's end of the Chesterfield and sat down.

'At the end of the week,' Margaret said. 'I don't know why I ever started it.'

'The craving for excitement,' Cecilia suggested.

Margaret acknowledged the possibility as if she made confession for the vanities of youth. 'One does, rather, run about after excitements,' she admitted, and added, with a whimsical glance at Stephen, 'Even such things as going up to the top of a crane. Did he tell you that it nearly made me ill?'

'He told me nothing whatever about it,' Cecilia replied. 'If I hadn't had the news from you, he would have kept the whole adventure a profound secret.'

Stephen understood that his mother was loyally playing his game for him, but he did not want it to be played in this way. He was still uncomfortably aware of being there under false pretences. Cecilia, perhaps doubting his ability, had not forced him to invent an excuse for coming at six o'clock. Her trick was probably safe enough. But he disliked the idea of playing any kind of trick on Margaret. And this innuendo concerning his reasons for saying nothing of the crane incident was almost equally 'tricky.' It all so very manifestly struck a false note.

He frowned and looked at Margaret with an expression that begged her not to take him at any value other than his own.

'As a matter of fact,' he began, but Cecilia interrupted him.

'I must just go to Chris for a few minutes, dear,' she said to Margaret. 'He and I had a slight misunderstanding this afternoon, and I promised to go to him as soon as the people had gone. And when we've made it up will you come and help me put him to bed?'

The two women looked at one another with a perfectly clear understanding of this further piece of chicane, and there was something in Margaret's eyes and voice that, as it were, reluctantly submitted to it, when she replied.

'If you're not too long,' she said.

'Ten minutes at the outside,' Cecilia returned gaily.

Stephen jumped up to open the door for her. She did not look at him as she went out.

He closed the door behind her with an exaggerated carefulness. He was so intent now upon what he had to say that Margaret's presence in the room with him appeared to be little more than a necessary incident of the setting. He dared neither look at her nor think of her, and he began to speak with the whole width of the room between them, finding support in leaning his back against the door as if barring any possible invasion—though the truth is that he was entirely unconscious of his own attitude.

'I want to explain,' he said. 'My mother sent me a note this morning telling me not to come till six. I thought she'd probably tell you. I don't want you to think I arranged this. I meant to come and see you in Bryanston Square this afternoon. I had to see you somehow after last night. I told my mother about it. I couldn't help it. I'd been thinking all kinds of

things; after I'd seen you outside the theatre. I thought you had—had done with me—didn't want to be bothered with me any more. And I meant to have an accident at the works. I didn't tell my mother that, but I knew that that was what it must come to, and I suppose I wanted to put everything straight with her first. I'm not sure. I was a little off my head. I can't tell you really why I came here after I saw you. But anyway I did, and my mother gave me a sort of hope that perhaps I was wrong about your not wanting to see me again. She was tremendously kind to me, and encouraged me no end——' He made his first pause before he added, by way of rounding up his speech and making his intention quite plain, 'And then your coming here to-day.'

He had not once shifted his gaze from a particular spot on the carpet about half-way between him and Margaret while he made this explanation, and that spot still held his attention while he waited for her reply.

Margaret, although she had sat quite still and made no effort to interrupt his explanation, had permitted herself to look at him. One side of her mind listened to and clearly understood every word he was saying, another side was offering her the strangest contrasts. She remembered the many other proposals she had received, all so similar in kind. Nearly all of them, so it seemed to her, had been accompanied by a surreptitious snatching for her hand, or by attempts to embrace or kiss her. Indeed, the one exception she could recall was the instance of Graham Coulter, the author, who had lounged in the corner of a settee and regretfully admitted that he saw no alternative but to marry her, although it would probably ruin his work to do so.

When she spoke she was still awaiting the verdict of her own suspended judgment. She had had a

strong reaction after he had left her the previous afternoon. She had been scared at her own liking for him, and had determined—finally, as she supposed—that ‘it would never do.’ Then the scene outside the theatre had upset her again. Cecilia’s guess had not been quite a correct one. Margaret had gone out to supper with young Lord Merton, and had been haunted all through that entertainment by the memory of the horror in Stephen’s eyes. She had felt ever since that she must make some explanation to him, and had welcomed the chance of meeting him that afternoon in Bedford Square.

‘I don’t quite understand why you ran away so quickly last night,’ she said. ‘I had been laughing a good deal all the evening, and you know how, when one gets in that mood, the least thing sets you off again. It wasn’t a bit that I didn’t want to see you any more.’

Stephen looked up doubtfully. This explanation did not run with his desire nearly so well as his mother’s had done.

‘But what did you mean by asking me to read that story?’ he asked.

Margaret blushed. The direct question rather flustered her. And he looked so big and solemn and ominous standing there with his back to the door.

‘What you said made me think of that story,’ she said, trying very hard to persuade herself that her reference to *The Brushwood Boy* was just a commonplace remark without any compromising significance. ‘I didn’t know that you would take it so seriously,’ she added.

‘Was that all?’ Stephen asked, and she could not fail to realise that for the first time in her life she was in the presence of tragedy.

There could be no mistaking him. He was too utterly sincere. He would neither threaten nor beseech her;

he would not even press her for a more explicit statement. He would just go away and the next morning there would be an accident at the works. And, however doubtful she might still be of her ultimate intention, she knew quite certainly that she could not bear him to be killed—not only because the responsibility would be hers, but also because she definitely wanted him. The thought of marrying him opened up a prospect of endless inconveniences and difficulties, but she preferred even that alternative to the thought of the threatened ‘accident.’

‘No, it wasn’t all,’ she said.

He did not look up. ‘What else did you mean?’ he asked.

She threw back her head as if she wanted more air. ‘Would you mind very much coming over here and sitting down?’ she said. ‘It tires me to talk right across the room like this.’

She made a place for him on the Chesterfield, and he went and sat by her, but he still made no attempt to touch her.

‘What else did you mean?’ he repeated.

‘Well, it was true, in a way,’ she said, with a slight touch of fretfulness in her tone. ‘I did always rather like you. At the King’s School, you know, I—I picked you out, in a way. And when I saw you again, that night outside the theatre about a fortnight ago, when we didn’t speak, you remember, I had a—a sort of feeling that you’d come back.’

‘And now?’ he persisted relentlessly.

‘You’re so dreadfully serious about it, you frighten me,’ she said.

‘Oh! yes, I’m very serious about it,’ he said. ‘I don’t think it would be possible for any one to be more serious about anything.’

‘You mean that you want to—to——’ she suggested.

'To marry you.'

He said it quite firmly, as if he reminded her that he had made his intentions quite clear on that point a few minutes earlier. Nevertheless, he used the word 'marry' with a kind of gentleness as he uttered it; dwelling upon it slightly as upon a word of extraordinary sacredness and beauty.

She made a little leap to get beyond the danger point as quickly as possible. 'But you don't seem to realise all the difficulties,' she said, with a defensive feverishness, and rather as though they had been engaged for years. 'Your position, I mean, for one thing. My father, for instance, wouldn't hear of it, I know. And then, what could we live on? I've been so dreadfully spoilt, I should hate to have to live on about seven or eight hundred a year now. It's all very well for you to threaten me with dreadful things like that accident you talked about; but supposing I did agree, what could we possibly do?'

He did not answer immediately, and then he said steadily, 'Yes, I know, but what I want to be sure about first of all is whether you could ever care . . . enough to marry me.'

Margaret had, she believed, been playing her part in the conduct of this unique affair with the greatest coolness and dexterity; and she was amazed and horrified with herself when she discovered that she was, suddenly and disgracefully, on the verge of tears.

'It isn't . . . I don't——' she began, and felt for her pocket-handkerchief. 'You—you do *bully* me so,' she protested passionately, and then her tears came in a quite astonishing gush. She had always wept with this quiet violence. As a little girl her sister Grace used to implore her not to cry. 'Oh, Marge, *don't!* you'll make yourself so *wet*,' was Grace's invariable form of remonstrance.

The sight of the impetuous stream of tears that began to trickle down her face, even before she could use her ridiculously inadequate speck of a handkerchief, had an almost miraculous effect upon Stephen. He entirely forgot himself. He could not bear to see her crying like a little girl of twelve. He was willing to do anything she could ask him to stop that astonishing fount of tears. But she was obviously incapable of speech, and it was an immense protective influence rather than any demonstration of passion that made him put his arms round her and beg her not to cry any more.

But having thus impulsively and dispassionately achieved the embrace, he found that he could not release her. His arms tightened about her, he drew her still more closely to him, he bent his cheek down and pressed it violently against her hair. He knew that he was taking an unfair advantage of her, but he did not care. He felt that he must go on holding her, even against her will. This was the supreme ecstatic moment of his life, and he meant to prolong it to its utmost limit. He had no thought for the future, nor at the moment for Margaret's own desire, he was conscious only of the perfect enjoyment of holding her close to him, and he was ready to resist, brutally if need be, any attempt to deprive him of his ecstasy.

Margaret, however, made no resistance, and it seemed to him that ages of exquisite bliss had passed before he heard her voice, little and smothered, crying out to him.

He shuddered with apprehension. 'I couldn't hear,' he whispered, prepared still to disobey her if she commanded him to let her go.

'Oh! have you got a handkerchief?' was Margaret's slightly petulant response.

The needs of convention undid him where force or

protestation would have failed; and as he found the handkerchief for her, she pulled herself away from him.

'You admit that you do bully me,' she said in a calm voice.

'I couldn't help it,' he said. His eyes had found their pleasure at last. He was no longer afraid to look at her; and his glance still held and caressed her, while his heart beat furiously at the realisation that she was not, after all, angry with him.

'Don't,' Margaret said, blushing.

'I must,' he said.

'Not like that,' she pleaded.

'I can't help it,' he said.

'But I must look such an awful sight,' she remonstrated. 'With my eyes and nose all red. I know what I always look like after I've been crying.'

He drew a long sigh of rapture. 'You look——' he tried, and failed completely to find any comparison that was not hopelessly banal. But his eyes spoke for him.

She took the more obvious means of escape by hiding her face in her hands and his handkerchief.

'I haven't even said that I don't hate you,' she murmured from beneath her ambush. 'I'm sure I've got reason enough.'

'Do you?' he asked, with a touch of anxiety. He knew that a further resort to physical force was no longer possible, and already he was aching with the need for the further delight of her.

She dropped her hands. 'We *must* be sensible,' she said.

'What *do* you propose to do? To marry me on how much a year?'

'If you care for me, it doesn't matter how much money we have,' he said, with calm conviction.

'But it does,' she retorted, with a feebleness that was almost ludicrous by comparison with his assurance.

He shook his head.

'Oh! Stephen!' she protested, but he knew that the protest was not against his contradiction, but against the intense avowal of love that still showed in his eyes. He was, however, encouraged by her use of his Christian name.

'You do care,' he said. 'I know you do. You have always; although you may not have known it yourself. Haven't you? Don't you know it now?'

He was rapt and lost in love, divinely without self-consciousness, and the movement with which he slipped on to his knees before her and took her hands in his, had all the grace of the natural animal.

'Oh! perhaps. I don't know. Yes. Yes, I do. I always have.' She surrendered finally without reserve. She felt the power of his longing drawing her like a physical force. She bent her head and kissed him on the lips, with a long, passionate kiss that made renunciation of all her other ambitions.

'And you care enough to live in a pokey little house anywhere, Medboro', for instance?' he asked, after a long interval.

She raised her eyebrows in an expression of whimsical surprise. 'Does it matter at all what *I'm* prepared to do?' she asked. 'I've given in. I haven't any will of my own left. You'll make me do whatever you want.'

'It won't be such a very pokey house,' he assured her, by way of apology for getting his own way.

'And what about my father?' she continued.

'I'll never be able to persuade him,' he admitted. 'I'll try, of course, but he won't listen. We'll have to be married without his consent.'

'I suppose you'd break into the house and take me away by force?' she suggested.

'If necessary,' he agreed quietly. He knew that nothing could stop him, now that she had admitted her love for him.

Indeed, so superb was his confidence that in a sudden panic lest he might suggest carrying her off then and there in order to anticipate all future opposition, she desperately dragged him back to a recognition of the common affairs of life.

'Surely,' she exclaimed, 'your mother's been away more than ten minutes?'

He looked at his watch. 'It's just after seven,' he said. 'Wait here for a minute. I'll go and find her.'

As he left the room he heard somewhere deep down in the house, the distant slamming of a door.

Cecilia was not in either of the nurseries, and the drawing-room was quite empty. But in the hall he found Butler, who told him that Mrs Threlfall had gone out a few minutes before. She had not said where she was going, nor when she would be likely to return.

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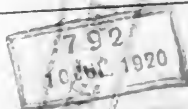
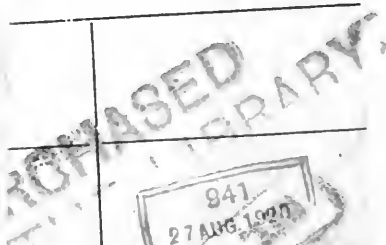
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